

Cruising the South

K J Tesar



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Chapter One: Escape from Eden

With a growing smile on his face, Matt checked the street number on the note he had written himself, and stopped the van in front of the house where Sandy had told him he was staying. He was just about to toot the horn when he saw Sandy waving out to him from a big bay window to one side of the house. He waved back, and settled in to wait. He couldn't help but admire the house. It was a beautiful building, built in the typical style of the old colonial wooden houses of Christchurch. The front doorway had a little porch protecting it from the elements, with its own small roof cutting into the main roof, giving the front of the house, along with the two symmetrical bay windows on each side, a very imposing, unique look. Matt mused that back in the old days they really knew how to build a house. Back when style counted, not just cost.

The front door opened and Sandy came running down the steps, smiling broadly, with his backpack loosely slung over one shoulder. Matt jumped out to greet him.

'Matt, you bloody bugger, how the hell are ya?'

The two friends warmly embraced each other.

'Looking good there Sandy! I was surprised when I saw you that you hadn't got fat over these last couple of years.' joked Matt.

In point of fact Sandy was as slim as he had always been.

'You're looking good too, man. I can't believe you've lost the beard, and moved into three-day stubble territory. How's that working out for you?'

Matt shrugged his shoulders, and laughed.

'Pretty easily really. It just means shaving every three days. A bit of a pain out of your copybook. It seems to work pretty well for you.'

Matt opened the side sliding door of the van.

'Here, throw your pack in, and let's get this shebang on the road.'

Sandy dropped his pack in, walked around the front of the van and got in.

'Nice wheels, Matt. I can't believe we will be travelling in such style.'

Matt thought he detected an ever so slight hint of sarcasm in his friend's tone at the sight of his rather aged form of transport.

'Hey, don't take the piss out of the old girl. She's pretty sensitive. Treat her well, and she will look after you. That's if you want her to get us there.'

'Well anything is better than how we used to do it with the old thumb out. That was hard work. Let's do it Matt, let's get this road trip out on the highway!'

Matt pulled the van back out onto the road.

'Actually you were staying on the right side of town for making a quick getaway. We've just got to head across a couple of streets, through the Port Hills tunnel, and in no time at all we will be on the main road south.'

'Nice one. Man am I tired! I had a bit of a late night with my friends last night. They put on a farewell dinner for me, with plenty of booze. I'm not even sure if I bloody slept at all. Or, if I did, it wasn't for long.'

'Plus, you're not as young as you used to be, so you can't handle the pace any more.'

Sandy laughed.

'Yup, that's it alright. Actually I think it's all about getting used to your New Zealand booze. What I'm used to is...'

Matt cut him off, mid sentence.

'Hey, don't start that shit! Don't tell me you've become a bloody moaning Aussie!'

They both laughed.

'It looks like I still can't put one over you, Matt.'

'Try as you might.'

Matt reached over and slapped his friend on the arm.

'Really good to see ya, man.'

'Yeah, you too. It's been too long.'

Matt couldn't wait to pull out onto the main road south, and to put the city in the rear view mirror. The trip was on.

'Where exactly do you know those people from?'

When he got no answer he looked over at his mate. Sandy had fallen asleep!

Matt laughed to himself, and set about burning some kilometres.

As the Kilometres flew by, Matt felt a growing sense of release. The lush green pastures brought him a sensation of well being. The cows lazily grazing seemed to put things back into the right perspective for him. All the built up drama he had experienced in Christchurch seemed to ooze out of his body. He had escaped. He was free. It was over. The further they got away from the city, the better he felt. Finally he felt that he could breathe. He glanced over at his travelling companion. He couldn't believe that he was dozing away in his seat, with his head wobbling from side to side, front to back, in coordination with the movements of the van. Matt laughed out loud. It seemed that Sandy had really overdone it, farewelling his friends in the 'Garden City'. Matt, himself, had had

little to regret about his departure. Things had seemed to almost disintegrate all around him. Debris of a failed undertaking had seemed to litter the very floor beneath him. He had left behind only the amassed rubble of what had constituted his failed attempt at putting something together in that lovely place. There had been the ever worsening situation with his flatmate, although, in reality, that could have been easily resolved. He could have just moved house. The real sensation of devastation had come from the collapse of the business he had been slowly building. It had been early days, but still there had been a great feeling of promise there. Things had been looking good, and growing constantly. He sighed, as he looked at the picturesque farms of Ashburton. He had to let it all go. There was no point dwelling on it any more. Things had gone the way they had gone, and that was that. He would throw himself into the road trip he had embarked on with Sandy, and just leave all the rest of it behind. Spilt milk, and all that. No point in crying over it. He certainly had left a lot of spilt milk behind him. Enough for many tears of milk. He laughed again, and glanced over to see if his laughter had awoken sleeping beauty. Not a chance. Then it struck him. He was actually laughing. How good was that? It seemed like the distance that he was putting between himself and ground zero of his exploded life was actually working. He felt liberated. He realised that it was all over. He was free of its burden. A new chapter was beginning. Who knew where it would all lead? If nothing else he had sure learnt a few valuable lessons back there in the burning ruins of his modest attempt at being self-employed. Lessons that would stay with him for a long time to come, burnt into his very fabric. As he saw the food shops of Timaru pass by, he felt some pangs of hunger. By the time he had loaded up his gear, and picked up Sandy, it had been around midmorning when they had actually started to head out of Christchurch. The kilometres had been flying by, although considering the old run-down state of his van, flying by was a bit of a relative term. His van's version of flat stick was fairly slow compared to most of the rest of the traffic. Still, he had managed to crash out enough distance to feel as though the trip had begun, and there was no turning back. Not that in any way he wanted to.

'My God, my neck is killing me. What's the time? Where are we?'

Matt laughed again as he looked over at his friend. He had always been called Sandy because of his blond hair. Matt couldn't even remember if he had actually ever known his real name. Maybe even Sandy didn't remember it any more. That blond hair was shoulder length, and generally pretty unkempt, although it made for a wonderful picture frame surrounding his always stubbled smiling face. Sandy was one of life's happy people.

'Welcome back, my friend. Welcome to the 'Sleepers Road Trip'. Are you intending to sleep your way around the South Island, by any chance?'

Sandy was rubbing his sore neck.

'Very funny. How about some lunch? I'm starving. Where are we? Shall we stop in Timaru for something to eat?'

'Been there, done that.'

Sandy laughed.

'What? I doze off for a few minutes, and we have already just about gone halfway around the South Island? Are we being chased by someone? What's your hurry?'

Matt inwardly grimaced momentarily. Maybe he did feel that he was being chased. Chased by the demons that had been unleashed on him back in Christchurch. He shook the dark thoughts off.

'Don't worry, I've got everything organised for a fair banquet. Besides, State highway 1 from Christchurch to Timaru goes inland, so there weren't any good beach views, just a lot of farms. Green grass, and all that shit. Do you care for lunch at St. Andrews, dear fellow?'

Sandy replied, also entering into the jocular formal banter.

'I do indeed, kind sir. What have you got in mind?'

'Hey, look! There's our first view of the sea. What do you reckon? Looks good, eh?'

'Yeah nice one, Matt. It does look good. Probably those farms back there did as well.' Sandy replied sardonically.

'Yeah? So what was I supposed to do? Yell at you? Hey, wake up, dude, there's grass, green green grass!'

Sandy laughed.

'Good point. Well, I must admit I do feel better after a little nap, so..., anyway, tell me more about this banquet you are about to prepare?'

'You, my friend, are in for a fair culinary delight.'

'I like it already.'

They both laughed. Yes, thought Matt, it was all behind him. He would hold onto it no more.

The cold air of the early morning was giving way to more of an acceptable chill. It was time to start painting. Matt walked around the back of the house, looking for Roger. As he turned the corner he saw him placing a long ladder against the wall, right below the window that had been the focus of much

debate and discussion.

'Don't even think about it.'

'Hey, listen, Matt, she was just there. It's not as if I was spying on her.'

Matt frowned, and shook his head as he looked at his business partner. Roger had a sort of look of eternal innocence about him. With his youthful looking face, and earnest expression it was difficult to ever be angry with him. He was just too nice a person.

'Yeah well, Roge, she probably hadn't been expecting to see someone leering in her window at her up on the first floor.'

'I wasn't! I was just painting outside her window, when she...'

'When she strutted around in her undies, yeah I get it. Do me a favour, and just stay away from her window.'

Roger, without a word, gave a forlorn glance up at the first floor window where he had seen that beautiful vision, just the previous day. Matt decided that it would be better if he were to finish painting around the suspect window, making sure his ladder was never in a position that would let him look in through the window. It was true that most of the residents should have realised that the outside of the property was being painted, but someone living on the first floor was probably used to having total freedom from being intruded on. That is, until Roger turned up at their window, peeking in. Obviously the woman had complained to the property manager, who had then called Matt looking for an explanation. Matt had gone into damage control mode, and had tried to explain the situation in the best light possible. He had told him that normally during the day most of the residents were out at work, or otherwise engaged, so they hadn't been expecting to catch anyone unawares. The manager had accepted his reasoning, but had made it clear that he didn't want a repeat performance. Matt would make sure that there wasn't one. Even though he and Roger were equal partners in the business, Matt had really assumed the leading role, being the one who mainly found their jobs, and the one who was in charge of working out the pricing, which was not an easy thing at all. It was all uncharted territory for him, but at the same time it was a challenge that he enjoyed. For the most part they had been painting the outsides of houses, but recently they had moved into doing some landscape gardening as well. And of course there was the small house they were fixing up. In fact, work was piling up, and things were looking good, notwithstanding the occasional scantily-dressed-woman-through-the-window incident. Matt looked at his watch, and then said to Roger.

'Hey mate, I'm gonna shoot off and look at that lawn job. We better finish painting here by noon, to let the paint dry before the cool air of the evening sets

in, so if the other job is a go we can start on it this arvo. What do you reckon?'

'Yeah, good idea. In the meantime I'll finish off around the side.'

Just then the window of much contention up on the first floor opened, and the two of them looked up. An absolutely beautiful woman, dressed in her nightgown, poked her angry-looking face out at them. She saw the ladder, still leaning against the side of the building, just below her window.

'Again? I thought you would have got the message by now?'

Matt went into apologetic mode.

'No, don't worry, we aren't working around here today. We will finish it when you aren't at home.'

The woman, with even acknowledging what Mat had said, simply slammed the window shut.

'Wow,' said Matt to his partner, 'she is definitely good looking, apart from the disgruntled look, that is.'

Roger smiled, and replied cheekily:

'Yeah, hard not to take a peek, don't you reckon?'

The two of them laughed. Straight away the window of pain opened again, and the indignant woman leaned out, glaring angrily at the two of them. Matt was just about to say something, when, in a flash, she slammed shut the window again.

The two lads tried desperately to stifle the building laughter.

'Don't say anything,' warned Matt. 'Off you go. Come on, move it.'

Roger, still smiling uncontrollably, grabbed the ladder and walked around towards the side of the house.

'You would have done the same,' he called back.

Matt glanced back up at the window. Actually he probably would have.

Matt took a couple of steps back, and sized up the building. Christchurch had some very beautiful examples of old colonial style houses, built in wood with fine detailing, but that definitely wasn't one of them. It was more like a two-storey rectangular box, which had perfunctorily been separated into flats of the lower quality, cheaper kind. Still, it was a pretty big job for them, so he wasn't complaining. Plus the property manager also looked after some other places, so it could lead onto some more work for them. He walked around the side of the house past Roger, and out towards the front, where their truck was parked. He smiled as he looked at their new truck. New, not in the sense of brand new, but new for them. They had traded in the old bomb of a truck that they had initially bought, using it as a deposit for the new one. The payments were fairly reasonable, as long as work kept coming their way, but that certainly

didn't seem to be a problem. The old truck had been broken down more times than not, so, apart from the cost of always having to get it fixed, they had also lost out on valuable work days. The choice before them had been easy, it had been time to take it all up a notch. For the painting side of things probably a van would have been more than sufficient, but with the growing amount of landscaping they were getting into they had both agreed on getting another small truck. They had picked up the first one mainly because it had been cheap, but then the two of them had realised that if they wanted to expand the business, a small truck was definitely the way to go. So the truck parked right there in front of him represented their hopes for the future.

Driving round in the truck felt good. He felt that he had achieved a lot, he was getting somewhere. Matt mused about getting a business name painted on the door, or on the side of the truck. Maybe 'The Bunglers', or 'The Botch-up Boys'. He smiled to himself. Well, true as that may be, they were probably not the sort of names that would inspire great confidence in potential customers. Now that he was in his early twenties Matt wondered if it was time to become a bit more of a serious person? Not too much so, he hoped. He still wanted to always take life with a grain of salt, so to speak. But it did feel good to be achieving things. He pulled up outside the house where he had arranged to do the quote, and turned off the engine. What a grand entrance, he thought, pulling up in his truck. It was funny how people assumed you were what you said you were, just because you fitted the prerequisite appearance. If you said you were a landscape gardener, and then pulled up in a truck, wearing work clothes, well... you probably were. When you take your car to a mechanic's, and a guy walks out wearing overalls with grease on his hands, you really just assume he's a mechanic. Appearance mattered. Appearance inspired confidence. The unassuming man who had come out to greet him seemed friendly, and well disposed to his apparent landscape gardener in disguise.

'Hello, I'm Matt.'

They shook hands.

'Hi there, come on round the back, and I will show you the disaster we call our garden.'

They walked down a driveway running alongside the house to the rear of the property.

'What we would like to do is to turn this mess into a lovely lawn. If that's possible. What do you think? Big job?'

Matt eyed up the patch of barren land sitting where a beautiful lawn should have been. He quickly summed up the situation, and instantly went into his

classic, confidence inspiring, no-worries-mate mode.

'Well, what we have here is a lack of good topsoil. Grass won't grow in these conditions, but actually the solution is relatively simple. You have a few bumps and hollows, so we would just need to level it all out, then bring in a few inches of good quality topsoil, seed it with a nice lawn seed, and finally roll it all down flat. Then, with just a few days of lightly sprinkling on water the seeds would germinate and, 'Bobs your uncle', you've got yourself the start of a lovely back lawn. Once it had started to grow you could continue with the daily watering, to save yourself some money. It would need to be watered for around a few weeks, in all.'

The homeowner nodded in pensive agreement.

'No wonder I couldn't get anything to grow. I never thought of the soil quality. How much is all that going to cost?

'Let me go out to the truck, and I'll work out some numbers for you.'

Matt walked back to the truck, and got out his pad. He had already priced, and completed, another job similar to that one, so he was pretty confident about easily working out an acceptable price. All it really needed was a few truckloads of topsoil, a couple of boxes of lawn seed, and a couple of days of elbow grease. They could hire a grass roller for half a day to roll it down well, before starting with the water sprinkling. An easy one, finally. His thoughts drifted to the small house they were fixing up. That definitely wasn't an easy one. In fact, each time they went there the amount of work that needed to be done just grew and grew. He and Roger almost hated going there. Matt knew he had seriously blown the pricing on that job, but they just had to get through it, somehow, and move on. In point of fact they had to go there the following morning. The owners were going to be doing one of their regular, and always intrusive, checkups on the progress being made. He felt a sinking feeling in his stomach just thinking about it. He tried to shrug it off. He jumped out of the truck, and walked back to the waiting client, quote in hand.

'Here you go.'

Matt handed the guy his quote. The prospective client carefully read the numbers.

'Is this a fixed price, or an estimate?'

'Fixed price. Not a cent more. This takes us through to when the grass is starting to grow, and then you will have to keep on watering it every day yourself for a few weeks. If you want to think about it...'

'No, no, it's a good price. When can you start?'

'Well, this afternoon if you like. We can start levelling it out, and begin to

spread out some topsoil. Is that alright with you?'

'Brilliant! I'm not here but my wife will be home, and anyway you've got good access down the driveway here, so just help yourself.'

'Good one. Me and my partner will be here after lunch then. See ya later.'

'OK, bye, and thanks.'

Matt smiled as he walked back to the truck. If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck. He wasn't sure exactly why he still felt like a bit of an imposter, he was actually doing the work. What's more, he was doing it pretty well. He had convinced everyone else of his ability, but he himself was still slightly sceptical about it all. He thought of another possible name for the partnership, 'The Bumpers and Stumpers'.

The afternoon had gone well, extremely well. After having picked up Roger they had got stuck into the new endeavour, levelling out the back yard, and even bringing in the first load of topsoil. It was good to have an easy job for a change. He looked over at Roger, who was drinking water from the hose.

'Hey, man, it went pretty well today, don't you think?'

'Yeah, shit yeah. This job is a piece of cake. Good one, Matt, well found.'

'Unfortunately, I think we gotta put in an appearance at the house of horrors tomorrow.'

Roger groaned.

'Really?'

'Yeah, they said they would drop in sometime late morning, so we better be there, cracking on with it.'

'I just can't understand what the hell is going on with that side wall, I must have painted it five times already.'

'Yeah, it's a bloody strange one.'

They both fell into an uneasy silence. The so-called house of horrors was a job that was definitely not going as well as had been hoped. Every time they went there the amount of work they had to do seemed to just grow, and grow, but the quote Matt had given for the work remained the same. To top it off there was some strange thing happening with one of the side walls of the house. It was east facing, so they would wait until the sun was on it, having dried up the morning dew, before painting it with the vivid blue colour the owners had chosen. For some reason, even though it was a water-based paint, it just didn't seem to dry sufficiently before the evening chill set in, and it would then turn into a pale blue shade, contrasting badly with the other walls of the house. Each time they repainted it, the same thing happened. Roger broke the silence.

'Are we actually still making money on that place?'

'Nope, we have pretty much already done more work than what it's paying us. Anyway, tomorrow I will ask for another part payment, but we are really just going to have to finish that one for free. Sorry, man, I guess I fucked up on the quote.'

'Hey, it's not your fault. Anyway, no way could I price these jobs. The occasional set back is only to be expected. Don't worry, we'll get through it.' Roger was a rock.

'Thanks man. Do you want me to pick you up in the morning, or shall we meet up out there?'

'Yeah, give me a lift, if it's no bother.'

'Sure. Listen, Roge, throw all the gear on the truck, and I'll go and tell the wife that we will be back the day after tomorrow.'

The day's work was over. It was time to head home.

Matt was pretty tired as he pulled into the driveway of his house, the house he shared with one of the biggest pricks he had ever met. It was dark, and cold, so Matt was slightly reassured to see smoke coming out of the chimney. Usually ding-back Derek, as Matt called him, would leave it up to him to do things like getting the fire going. It appeared that small miracles could happen. Matt watched with wonder as the smoke rose out of the chimney, did a perfect U-turn, and flowed back down to ground level, dispersing itself in the light mist of early evening. That couldn't be good for your health, he thought, even though it looked really good. Just breathing the air would be like smoking a six-pack of fags. Yet another strange atmospheric condition he had to put up with, like the mystery wall of the house of horrors. He wanted a beer.

When he entered the house he went straight to the fridge, and grabbed a cold one. The first half of the can didn't even touch the sides as it went down. He had really needed that. He saw that ding-back was sitting in the lounge room, watching the TV.

'Hey, Derek, you should go outside and have a look at the smoke coming out of the chimney. It's turning straight around, and coming back down...'

Derek quickly interrupted him.

'There's always something for you to moan about, isn't there? You could at least have thanked me for getting the fire going, but no, something always has to be wrong.'

Matt stopped mid-sentence, and decided not to bother explaining about the interesting phenomenon with the smoke from the chimney. He wasn't sure why he had even bothered in the first place. He turned to go back to the kitchen, to find something to eat. Derek, on the other hand hadn't finished yet.

'For a hippy you always seem to have something to moan about. I thought hippies were supposed to be positive people. What went wrong?'

'Hippy? Dude, it's the early 80's, there are no more hippies. Haven't you been reading the papers?'

'You look like a hippy.'

Matt struggled to stop himself from replying to Derek, and telling him that he looked like a bloody moron with his yellow pants and green shirt. His man-about-town look, or so he thought. The disco wonder boy. The way things were going Matt knew that eventually they would come to blows. It was inevitable. In any case that evening he was too tired to bother with it all. He made himself a sandwich, grabbed some beers from the fridge and wandered over next door, to see if Marianne was at home. Not that she ever wasn't. Where else would she be? When she came to the door she was pleased to see him.

'Matt! Come on in. Hey, I have something to show you.'

Marianne rushed off to the kitchen, and quickly returned with an odd piece of woven fabric in her hand.

'Look at this, isn't it beautiful?'

Matt looked at the piece of fabric in her hand, not having any clue as to what it was.

'I like the colour,' he said vaguely, 'what actually is it?'

'A teapot cozy, silly!'

'A what?'

'Look, I'll show you.'

Marianne went and got a teapot from the kitchen. She then placed the fabric over the top of it.

'You see? It keeps the teapot warm.'

Matt always felt terribly sorry for Marianne, she obviously had some sort of mental health issues, but she was a perpetually bubbly, very happy person. She was incredibly likeable.

'Oh, nice one. Where did you get it from?'

'From a charity shop in town, it was only \$1. I love the coloured flowers on it.'

'Yes, the colours are great. Do you want a beer?'

'Yes, please! I'll get a couple of glasses.'

'No, not for me. I'm a straight-from-the-can sort of guy.'

They settled down on Marianne's old worn-out chairs, to have a natter. Marianne had a pretty face, with medium length brown hair. Unfortunately, she was seriously overweight.

'What were you in town for? Just to have a look around?'

Marianne's usually smiling face turned a bit wistful.

'No, I was actually looking at second hand cars. I would really love to be able to drive around, but none of the used car dealers would let me sign up to their never-never payments. I saw a lot of cars I liked, and I have the deposit, but no one would give me finance. Probably because I'm on welfare payments.'

'That's a real bummer. Yeah, those bastards can really give you the runaround. You wouldn't believe the problems we had trading in our old truck for this one.' That, of course, had been a total lie. The dealers had been lining up to give him and Roger credit, but Matt didn't want to make Marianne feel even worse. Apart from the fact that she was on welfare payments, it was obvious by her demeanour, and way of talking, that she had some sort of mental problems. That was the real reason she couldn't get financing for a car. Not that Matt was going to be so cruel as to mention that.

'Well, I've still got a few places to try. I would just love to drive around town. I haven't driven in years.'

'Keep on trying, Marianne, never let those bastards beat you down.'

'You know me! The eternal optimist!'

Matt smiled in return. He sat back and listened to the music playing on Marianne's stereo. Another beer and he would hit the sack. He was worn out, and he knew that in the morning he would have to face plenty of challenges. He didn't even want to think about it. He went to the fridge to get another beer.

'I thought you were in a hurry to get there?' said Roger, between mouthfuls of his cooked English breakfast.

'What's the matter? Don't you like your bacon and eggs, and whatever the hell else you have there?'

Roger laughed.

'Noooo, I'm loving in. I just thought you were in a hurry, that's all.'

'Actually, I ended up having a few too many beers with my neighbour last night, you know Marianne don't you? So I really felt like a greasy fry up to help with the hangover. Besides, until that bloody wall doesn't dry out from the dew, there's not much painting to do. Hopefully, I can finish off the rest of the never ending list, and we will eventually get the hell out of there.'

Roger's face turned morose.

'The nightmare that never ends.'

The two of them finished their breakfasts in silence. Neither was in any hurry to hit the house of brutal surprises. They slowly supped their coffees, dragging it all out as long as possible. Eventually Matt looked at his watch.

'Come on then, muggins, let's do it.'

In silence they paid for their food, and jumped in the truck. The house of no remorse was just around the corner, so there was no escaping their destiny.

'Oh my God, look Matt, they're already there, waiting for us.'

Matt chuckled.

'Yup, lovely way to start the day, mate. Well, let's do it.'

'I'm gonna set up for the wall. I'll leave them to you.'

'Thanks, man, I really appreciate that.'

The two of them laughed as they jumped out of the truck. Matt walked over to the two well-dressed investors who were making their lives a misery. George, the attack dog of the pair, had his usual miserable air about him, which, along with his pockmarked face, and his generally unfriendly demeanour made him look exactly like he was. A right bastard. On the other hand Jerry, who was tall and slim, had an almost apologetic look, as if he were constantly slightly embarrassed about the treatment they were always meting out. Not that he ever tried in any way to rein in his bulldog partner, but at least he appeared to realise that they were both a couple of swindling assholes.

'Morning guys.'

Without bothering with any preambles, George, in his usual aggressive style, got straight down to business.

'The blue on that wall is still coming out very faded.'

'Yeah, we are going to give it another coat this morning. The dew is off now, so hopefully it will take this time.'

'OK, well the colour has to match the rest of the house, so just bear that in mind. Why don't we run over some of the rest of the jobs.'

Matt groaned inwardly. Now what?

'Sure.'

He followed them inside.

George grabbed a broom and pushed up on the sagging ceiling in the lounge room.

'The only way to fix that is going to be by going over it with fresh plaster board. That stuff, whatever it is, is just too damaged to be fixed.'

Matt kept his silence. On previous occasions he had protested that a lot of the jobs he was constantly being faced with doing hadn't been in the original quote, only to be told that he had quoted to fix the whole place up, so it was all included.

'It's the same in the bedroom, too. Also, when are you going to replace the locks? The handles are loose, and the doors don't shut very well. It might be

best just to replace the doors completely, don't you think?'

Matt could see his business collapsing in front of his eyes. The very floor he was walking on was falling away. An abyss had opened up beneath his feet. All the work they had done to get where they were had been for nothing. One dud job, and they were blown out of the water. At least he would make a play for another part payment, so he played along.

'Yeah, it may be. Listen, I need another payment. I've got a lot of materials to buy, so can we sort out another part payment?'

George didn't look too impressed about the idea.

'We have already fronted up a lot of the total price.'

Matt's voice turned insistent.

'Hey, I need some more cash to buy all the materials, man. If you want the job finished.'

Jerry, the quieter one who usually left all the dirty work to George, finally entered the discussion.

'How much were you thinking?'

Matt went for broke.

'How about \$500?'

'That would be getting close to the final payment. We could give you another \$200.'

'Well, let's make it \$300, then.'

Jerry, obviously the money man, looked at Matt pensively.

'I'm afraid I can only stretch to \$250.'

Matt shrugged his shoulders.

'OK, I guess that will have to do then.'

Jerry took out his wallet, and handed the cash over to Matt. Then it was time for George, the harbinger of all things evil, to re-enter the fray.

'When do you think you will have it all finished?'

Matt knew that it was all over, and that their goose was cooked, but he decided to buy some time. In any case, none of it had any meaning any more. It was all over. Kaput. They had come to the end of the road.

'Should have it all done by the end of next week, if all goes well.'

George nodded in agreement.

'Great, we want to rent this place out as soon as possible. That would work for us. No later mind!'

Matt summoned up a dry smile.

'Sure, don't worry.'

The three of them walked out of the house, and the two investors headed over to

their car, and drove off. Forcing himself to smile, Matt waved them goodbye. He walked round the side of the house where Roger was setting up a plank on a couple of saw horses, to paint along the top of the low, single storied house.

'Don't bother with any of that, man. We are officially fucked.'

Roger looked up at him with a questioning expression. Matt explained the new list of work to do.

'Basically, from here on in we would be not only working for free, but actually buying the materials with our money. And there are a lot of them. The 'Bungling Buggers' are hereby bankrupt. Sorry, man, I really fucked this one up.'

Roger's face wore a thoughtful expression.

'I think they set us up from the start, those two bastards. They realised that we weren't that experienced at pricing, and just took us for a ride. The two shit-heads.'

'Well, it was me who did the pricing, so I'm the one to blame.'

'Hey, you did the pricing because you are better at it. I couldn't have done anything like that. Don't blame yourself. How bad are things?'

'Well, I got another part payment from them, and we have the backyard job to finish. Then, after we finish off painting that house with your girlfriend up on the first floor, we should have around five hundred bucks each. Trouble is, these two assholes are pretty big in the investment scene here, so by walking away from this job we will find it hard to get any more good jobs. Not to mention the thousands we owe in financing on the truck. We are screwed, mate.'

'I would like to stick with painting, that's what I'm good at. I think I can pick up painting work no matter what those pricks say.'

'Do you like the painting, or the Peeping Tom side of it?'

The two of them broke down laughing.

'Hey, perks of the job, mate.'

Matt's face took on a serious demeanour.

'We should have stuck to painting. That was going well. Mind you, the landscape gardening was looking good, too. Maybe I just wanted to grow the company too fast?'

'Not worth worrying about now, Matt. The way I see it, the real problem is the truck. What could we sell it for?'

'Probably nowhere near what we owe on it. That's for sure. Those financing bastards will hound us for the rest of our lives until we have paid off our debt. That's the biggest problem. What say we pick up some beers, and have a bit of a crisis management piss up back at my place?'

'Pizza included?'

Matt laughed.

'Hey, obviously. Things are never that bad that there won't be pizza involved.'

'Now you're talking.'

After scoffing some slices of pizza, and throwing down a few beers, Roger slumped back in his chair, more than satisfied.

'You know, after a few brews, and a good feed, it all doesn't seem that bad any more.'

Matt laughed along with him.

'Yup, although tomorrow, with a hangover thrown in, it will all come crashing back in, just like the ebb and flow of the sea. Your tide is in, my man, enjoy it.'

Roger laughed, and was just on the point of saying something when they heard a knock at the door.

'Come in! It's open!' called Matt.

Marianne sheepishly walked in.

'Hi, you don't usually come home for lunch, Matt.'

'No, it's a bit of an exceptional day today, Marianne. Hey, you remember Roger, right?'

'Sure. Hi Roger.'

Roger gave her a friendly smile and wave. He grabbed a beer from the carton laying next to him.

'Want a beer, Marianne?'

'It's a bit early for me, but, if you insist,' she said, taking the offered can.

'What's the celebration?'

Matt laughed, and proceeded to offer an explanation.

'It's really a bit of an upside-down celebration today. Long story short, we had a bad job, and it looks like the business is officially going under.'

Marianne's expression turned very sorrowful. She really cared for Matt.

'I'm really sorry to hear that. It all seemed to be going really well, what with the new truck, and all.'

Roger grimaced at the sound of the word truck.

'Yeah, that bloody truck, alright. Hey Marianne, you know anyone in the market for a truck?' he asked, jokingly.

Marianne, anything but jokingly, perked up at that news.

'Yeah, me. I really want any wheels I can get. How much do you want for it?'

The two partners went instantly quiet. Their mood turned serious. You could have heard a pin drop. They looked meaningfully at each other. An idea was forming. A slightly devious idea, it must be said, but an idea nonetheless. It was worth floating. Matt carefully thought about the right words to use.

'Well, it's all a bit complicated. Here's the deal. We still owe about \$5.000 on the truck to a finance company. We would be happy to sell it to you for \$1, with you taking over the repayments, which, obviously, you wouldn't pay. It would probably take them a couple of months to do the paperwork before repossessing the truck, during which time you would have wheels, all for the price of one buck. First, of course...'

'I'll take it!' interrupted Marianne.

Matt raised a hand.

'Hold your horses there girl. First we would have to find out if it is all legal, and above board. Those finance companies are real sharks. Once they sink their teeth into you they never let go.'

'Wouldn't worry me.' said Marianne laughing, 'I'm on the dole, I've got nothing they could take from me.'

Matt and Roger both knew that she wasn't on the dole, but was actually on long-term sickness benefits, which would in fact mean that the finance company wouldn't be able to touch her. They were more concerned about whether they would still be liable for the debt. It was all a bit distasteful to the both of them, but after a few beers they were prepared to look into any, and all, options. Even the distasteful ones. Matt wanted to slow it all down until they could work out the legalities of the situation.

'We'll look into it, Marianne, and let you know.' he said.

Roger sat up straight, as if in surprise.

'Hey, Matt, my brother-in-law is a solicitor, I could...'

Matt cut him off.

'The phone's in the kitchen, man. Find out. Go!'

Roger stood up, and hurried off to the kitchen.

'I'm so excited! Me, in a truck!'

Marianne was over the moon at the possibility. Matt smiled at her.

'Well, you would certainly cut a fine swathe, going off to do your shopping in a two and a half ton Bedford truck, that's for sure.'

'Can we go for a test drive now?'

'Hey, hold your horses, girl. First we have to find out if it's doable, plus we have been drinking so there will be no driving today, in any case. Let's just wait and see how it all goes.'

Marianne was absolutely beside herself at the thought of owning a vehicle. Matt was slightly apprehensive about what they would be unleashing on the good folks of Christchurch, but if it was feasible it would undoubtedly be a good solution to their problem. Besides, Marianne really would be untouchable. The

finance company would just repossess the truck, sell it for what they could, and write off the balance.

In walked Roger, triumphantly waving his arms in the air, as if he was a circus performer who had just pulled off an impossible act.

'It's a done deal, bro. Not a problem. With the right paperwork, which my brother-in-law will sort out, it's all legit.'

Marianne fairly squealed with delight. She pulled out a one dollar note.

'Here you go! I'll take it!'

Matt laughingly took the note, looked at it, and said:

'You're kidding, right? This scrawny old chewed up dollar note? You think you can buy a truck with this? No way, my dear friend. We want a brand spanking new note. Perfect condition. No less.'

All three of them laughed, each happy in their own way. With everything seemingly having been sorted out as regards the old, now failed company, Roger had another matter he wanted to discuss. He was already planning his next move. He was looking to his future.

'Listen Matt, if you want to sell your Commer van I would be interested. That would be perfect for me, if I'm just gonna do some painting.'

Matt was just pleased with how things had worked out with the burden of the truck. He wasn't thinking much further ahead than that.

'Yeah, maybe, I haven't really thought about what's next for me. You know it needs some work done, right? It doesn't have a first gear, or reverse. Apparently they are sort of the same cogs, just engaged in different directions.'

Roger laughed.

'Yeah, I remember. Still, with a reconditioned gearbox it would be as good as gold. Let me know what you decide. Anyway, I have to drop off the paperwork for the sale of the truck at my sister's later on, and it should all be ready to sign over in a couple of days.'

'Great, that gives us time to finish off the paying jobs, and then we are done.

The 'Bungling Boys' are no more.'

'I can't wait,' chimed in Marianne, smiling enthusiastically.

Matt, still with a slightly dubious sense of apprehension about the whole deal turned to her.

'First, young lady, we will have to have a few lessons. I know you can drive a car, but a truck is a bit more difficult. Tomorrow, after work, we will head out and take you for a spin, OK?'

The expression on Marianne's face couldn't have been more exuberant.

'I'll be waiting for you all day.'

Roger handed beers all round.

'Well, It looks like we all have something to celebrate.'

Matt took the offered beer.

'We do indeed.'

Through the shimmering haze of the sun lazily sweeping over him, Matt could faintly hear a strange irritating noise. He tried to block it out, and just lay there, warm in the sunshine. However, the noise just kept getting louder. Its insistence was starting to annoy him. He couldn't really understand precisely what it was. It sounded like a child banging on a tin drum, or the sound a train makes when it goes over a joint in the tracks. Ga-dunk ga-dunk. None of it made any sense to him, there weren't any trains near the beach. It all seemed so strange, not to mention bothersome. The noise continued, getting ever louder with its persistence, interrupting his pleasurable indolent sunbathing. Its consistency was becoming intrusive. The noise kept getting more and more invasive, laying waste to his amiable relaxed state of mind. Then he could almost feel himself being hurtled through time and space.

Matt awoke with a startle. For a moment he wondered where he was. Then he realised that he had fallen asleep on the couch after Roger and Marianne had left, and the phone was ringing. Bleary eyed, yawning as he walked, he made his way to the kitchen, and picked up the receiver.

'Hello?'

'Well, hello to you, too.'

'Sandy! How ya going? It's good to hear from you, man. How the hell did you get this number?'

'I sent a letter to your folks, asking where you were, and if they had your number, and voila. How's it all going with you, I haven't seen you for a couple of years. What are you up to?'

'Well, I've been doing some painting and landscaping work lately. Although it's all falling apart a bit at the moment. In reality, it's pretty much finished. In fact, I could just about be tempted to head back over your way. I could do with something new in my life. Where are you now? In Sydney?'

'It would definitely be good to see you, and do some travelling together again. Maybe I could head over to New Zealand? I remember you promised me a trip around the South Island. Would you be up for that?'

'Shit yeah, I'm pretty much just ending this chapter of my life, so a bit of an adventure would really do it for me. Do you really mean that, though? About heading over here?'

'Do you know where I am right now?'

Matt, still feeling a bit sleepy, had no idea.

'Sydney, or somewhere in Aus I suppose. I don't know. Where are you?'

'You won't believe this. I'm in Lyttleton, just over the Port Hills from you.'

Matt couldn't believe his ears. It was great news.

'What? You bloody prick, you're already over here? When did you get here? Where are you staying?'

Sandy laughed.

'I just got in a couple of days ago. I'm staying with some people I know from home, who have been over here for about a year now. As soon as I found out you were living in Christchurch as well, I decided to head over. One way or another, all the signs were telling me to get to New Zealand. The omens were all pointing to Christchurch. So, tell me, were you serious about hitting the road? Another good hitchhiking trip?'

Matt couldn't have been more serious.

'Yeah, I really am. What I was doing here is closing down right now, so I am free, and looking for something to do. Tell you what. I have an old Commer van. We could throw a couple of mattresses in it, and go around the South Island in style.'

'That sounds almost like too much comfort for the likes of us.' said Sandy jokingly, 'We might lose our hippy badges of honour.'

'I'm not a hippy any more.'

'You will always be a hippy. Once you're in, you're in for life.'

'Well, we'll see about that. Anyway, before you get too carried away about the travelling in style business. You might not believe this, but the van doesn't have a working first gear, or reverse.'

Sandy cracked up laughing.

'Actually I have absolutely no problems in believing that. In fact anything less would have been slightly disconcerting.'

Matt joined in the infectious laughter.

'Anyway, it's not all that bad. It's very low geared, so you can start off easily in second gear, as long as you aren't on an upwards slope, so that's not a problem. The reverse part can get a bit tricky. It quite often involves a bit of pushing. Well now, let me think. What could we do about that? Who do I know that could be the official pusher? Let me see, I do know an Aussie who is rather good at that sort of thing.'

Sandy couldn't stop laughing.

'I should have guessed there would be a catch. With you there always is. You

know though, oddly, that's a strange coincidence. I've been thinking about building up my upper body strength. This could be good for me.'

Matt was still laughing as well.

'Hey, works for me as well. I'm the driver, so...'

'Yeah, yeah, I've got the idea. No pushing for you. Hey listen, I am in for sure.

When do you think you would be ready for the off?'

'Pretty much in about a week's time, I reckon.'

'Brilliant, that gives me a bit of time to look around your fair city. It's a really nice city, isn't it? I really love it.'

'Yeah it is. So, what about a few beers, and a chat?'

'Sure, my friends are putting on a bit of a dinner for me tonight. What about tomorrow evening?'

'You are on my friend. Hey, give me your phone number there.'

Chapter Two: Meeting the Mulligory

It could not be denied. It was an absolutely stunning view. The beach out from St. Andrews was nothing short of beauty personified. The deep blue waves of the Pacific Ocean were steadily rolling in, and almost sluggishly breaking onto the crystal white sands of the beach. The mighty ocean was in a lazy mood, unhurriedly taking its time with its ebbs and flows.

'Hey, that was a good spot!' yelled Sandy, looking backwards.

'Sorry, mate, I was too busy admiring the beautiful blue water of the sea. I think I was bit a mesmerised. Let's head back.'

Matt slowed the van and looked for an incline by the side of the road. At a suitable spot he abruptly turned off the road, and ran up a slightly grassy embankment, then he put the van in neutral, and gently guided it down backwards, spinning the steering wheel to get the van facing the opposite direction. With the manoeuvre completed, he engaged second gear and proceeded to return along the road from where they had come.

'My God!' laughed Sandy ecstatically. 'You really have turned that into an art form. I must admit to having had some doubts about the possibility of getting around the South Island in a van with no reverse gear. No more. Those doubts have been formerly expelled. You have enlightened me.'

Matt laughed, he was really starting to enjoy laughing. It seemed like he hadn't felt so free in a long time. All burdens and weights had been lifted from him.

'Yeah, actually I'm starting to wonder if vehicles really do need reverse gear. Maybe it should be available only as an option? Plus, New Zealand is anything but a flat country, so there is always somewhere to drive up, and roll back down. This is the country that has made reverse gear redundant. Hey, I see the place you mean. Good spot, man.'

Matt pulled into the off-road parking bay, complete with picnic tables. The two of them got out of the van.

'So, what's for lunch. I'm starving.'

'You're gonna love this. Mulligory stew, my friend. The vegetarian version of an old Irish recipe. Handed down from generation to generation. Enhanced and refined by each bearer of its delicate composition.'

'I like it already. What can I do to help?'

Matt carried a box of vegetables he had taken from the back of the van, and placed it on the picnic table.

'OK, chop up an onion to start with, while I get a fire going. Then you can peel a couple of spuds, and two carrots. Then cut them up into little pieces.'

Sandy got busy with the task at hand while Matt searched for some dry twigs, and some rocks, to set up a cooking pit. He made a small circle with the rocks, scrunched up a piece of newspaper, which he then covered with the twigs. He lit the paper, and as the twigs started to burn, he placed a metal grill across the rocks. Sandy looked on in admiration.

'Bit of a boy scout are we?'

'You, young man, don't know how lucky you are.'

'I think I'm about to find out.' laughed Sandy.

When the twigs were burning well, Matt placed a billycan, the size of a small pot, onto the grill. He tipped in a small quantity of cooking oil, and threw in the cut onion. Within seconds the onion was frying up well. Matt added a little salt, some ground black pepper, and a generous quantity of curry powder. He mixed it all together with the frying onion pieces. While the two of them were busy working away at their various tasks Sandy sneaked a few glances at his friend. Matt's hair was a bit shorter, but still longish, and pretty untamed. The beard of old had been replaced with the new unshaven look, but there was something intriguingly new about Matt, apart from those minor changes. His captivating blue eyes were as piercing as ever, but there was something Sandy couldn't really put his finger on. Then it came to him. There had been a growth in his self-assurance, something akin to more maturity, even though barely a couple of years had past since they had last met. Matt hadn't lost his youthful playfulness or his great sense of humour, and he certainly hadn't lost his love of being outside of society's bounds, but he had bloomed a lot. Even though, in reality he was still only in his early twenties. Sandy liked the way Matt had broken out, it looked good on him.

'Ready with the spuds?'

'Yeah, and just about got the carrots ready, too.'

'Nice one, me old china. Here,' Matt handed a small cabbage to Sandy, 'get this fella chopped up. Small pieces.'

Matt tipped in the potatoes, and carrots, and let it all fry with the onions for a couple of minutes. Then he added some water, just enough to barely cover half the contents of the pot. As soon as the cabbage was chopped up he threw it into the pot, and then put the lid on.

'Are you going to mix it all together?' asked Sandy, looking on with interest.

'Yup, but first I'm gonna let the steam slowly cook everything through. I've just got to keep the fire going at the right rate of knots, not too hot, it's all about maintaining the perfect temperature. Pay close attention, you may learn something. Hey, listen, I've only got water to drink, sorry man, we'll get organised with some cold beers later on.'

'Well, after last night's bash water is just what the doctor ordered. I definitely drank far too much wine last night. It was nice, though. A white wine from Marlborough, they said, but I don't really remember where they said that is.'

'Right up the top of the island. That's the area around where the ferry from Wellington docks.'

'Far out! I've heard it's really nice there.'

'Yeah, the ferry trip across the Cook Strait is a must do. It weaves its way around a lot of small islands, before docking in Picton.'

'Is that on the list?'

'The list? To be honest, there isn't really much of anything planned, except for heading down to Dunedin first. Hey, it's officially on the list.'

Matt lifted the lid off the pot, and stirred together all the ingredients.

'OK, get the plates ready, she's a goer.'

Sandy grabbed two metal plates which he held out while Matt spooned the veggie stew onto them, trying to give equal portions. On the table Sandy had already prepared two metal mugs full of water. Matt bowed, and swung his arm in an arc like the maitre d' of a fine dining establishment.

'At your service, Monsieur. Get stuck in, man. Mulligory stew.'

Without further ado the two of them tucked into the fine fare.

Sandy, after sampling the vegetarian dish, nodded his head.

'Really nice, Matt. Everything is cooked well, and the curry gives it a nice tingle.'

'I don't cook much, but what I do, I do it well.'

They both laughed.

'So why is Dunedin on the newly formed list?'

'I've got a good friend down there, Felicity. She's sort of an on-again off-again girlfriend. I met up with her over in Aus, actually up in Kuranda, on one of my various excursions there. She stopped off and stayed with me for a few days when I was up in Nelson last year. Anyway, she's living in Dunedin now, so while we are on our trip I would love to take the opportunity to look her up. Plus, Dunedin is a really nice town. Really interesting architecture. That was where the Scottish immigrants settled, so the buildings are all sort of colonial Scottish, instead of the usual New Zealand style of colonial English. You'll love

it.'

'Will she mind you bringing me along?'

'Naah! No problems.'

Sandy looked at his friend slightly sceptically. He didn't really like being placed in the role of the unannounced guest. Still, if there were bad vibes he could always find a cheap guest house to stay in.

'Good lunch, Matt. I loved it.'

'Well, I'm glad to hear that. Get used to it. It's gonna be a regular event.'

'Fine by me.' replied Sandy, not realising just how regular a meal it was in reality going to turn out to be.

'Listen, I've got a couple of ten-litre water containers in the van. We can use them for drinking, cooking, and washing up. We've got to remember to fill them up, whenever we see some fresh water, OK?'

'I'm on it. That will be my job.'

'Good lad. I was hoping you'd volunteer. Let's clean this lot up, and go and have a better look at that beach.'

'Now you're talking.'

After quickly completing all washing up operations the two friends crossed the road, and walked up the low grassy sand dune to get to the beach. From the top of the dune both of them stopped, and took in the outstanding view in front of them. Before them lay a long dark blue ocean, quietly lapping onto a totally empty beach.

'Well, my son, welcome to New Zealand.'

'Thank you, kind fellow, it's a pleasure to be here.'

They both sat down to better take in the wondrous panorama.

'Hey Sandy, how is your sister? We had a nice time at her place, back whenever it was. She was really nice.'

'She's fine, another baby on the way. She's really happy with her life.'

'Nice house she's got. What's that place called? Newtown Gully?'

'Newtown Gully? Where the hell did you get that from? It's just called Newtown.'

'Really? Well, there was sort of a gully there. Maybe they should divide the suburb into Newtown Heights, and Newtown Gully? You know, the high end of town, and the slums, where the poor folks live.'

'Listen, Matt. Leave that with me, and I will run it by the mayor of Sydney the next time I bump into him.'

'Tell you what. Feel free to pass it off as your idea.'

They both laughed.

'Oh, I will do that alright, don't you worry.'

Matt looked out at the enticing flow of the lazy waves rolling in.

'You know, I'm actually pretty tempted to get in that water. It looks somewhat irresistible.'

Matt loved swimming. Sandy was rather less tempted.

'Good luck on that one. This morning when I got up I think it was around 4 degrees.'

'Yeah, but it's probably up near 12 to 14 now, so that could be doable. Obviously not for a soft Aussie, of course.'

'You can put big money on that one.'

Matt wasn't to be deterred.

'I'll see you in there.'

Matt raced back to the van and grabbed a towel. To warm himself up a bit he ran back over the road, over the dune, and down onto the beach. In a flash he had divested himself of his clothes, and ran naked into the icy cold water of the deep southern Pacific Ocean. From the beach Sandy could hear all sorts of wild screams. It wasn't immediately apparent whether they were screams of joy, or pain. Probably a bit of both, he thought to himself. Within the shortest of times Matt was back on the beach, wrapped up in his towel, shivering, and laughing. Sandy wandered down to join him.

'I think I've just witnessed the shortest swim in the history of mankind.'

Sandy was laughing at the sight of Matt's obviously distressed state.

'Short, but effective, my friend. That was absolutely fantastic! You've no idea how invigorating it was.'

'And I never will. Normal people don't go swimming when it's not even ten degrees.'

'Hey I like that, man, coming from you. You exited out of the category of 'normal people' quite some time ago.'

Sandy laughed.

'True enough Matt. I should have said sensible people.'

Matt laughed, as he finished drying himself.

'I've never been accused of being particularly sensible, so I will take that as a compliment.'

Matt let the towel fall to the sand, raised his face, and arms, to the warming sun.

'Apollo, let your rays of kindness flow through me!'

Sandy laughed.

'Something tells me this is gonna be a good trip.'

'Come on, man, let's get back on the road.'

Matt got dressed, and wandered back to the van, with Sandy lingering behind, taking one last look at the spectacular view, before he too walked back across the road to the van.

Sandy eagerly checked out the back of the van.

'I didn't really look too closely when you picked me up, I think I was still a bit drunk from last night, but you've really decked the van out well. I'm impressed. How did you manage to get two mattresses in there? I can't believe it.'

'Well, this is actually what they call the 'long wheel base version', or something like that, so it's quite spacious inside. I found this short mattress to lay sideways across the front, and then a normal sized mattress going lengthways behind it. All the other stuff we just put on the front seats when it's time to sleep. Hey, guess who gets the short mattress?'

Sandy smiled coyly.

'I don't know. Toss a coin for it?'

Matt slapped him on the shoulder.

'Perfect! Good idea. Actually that's what I thought too, so I tossed that coin, just the other day. Guess what? You lost. Anyway, you're shorter than me.'

'Yeah, by about half an inch, or so.'

'Yup, bummer that half an inch, eh?'

Matt looked up at the sky.

'You know, it's gonna be sunset in a couple of hours. I think on this trip we will be pretty much living by the light of day. I have some candles, but essentially I think we should follow the sun's cycle.'

'Sounds good to me.'

'Although, that said, I would really like to find a pub, and down a couple of cold ones, before hitting the sack.'

'I am definitely in on that, Matt. Lead the way.'

'Let's shoot off down the road, and see what we find. By the way, no farting in the van, please. Snoring I can handle, but I have my limits.'

'Actually snoring is well over my limit.'

'Oops...'

'Matt! You're kidding me right? You haven't become a bloody snorer, have you?'

Matt assumed the most innocent looking face he could muster up.

'Of course not.'

The two of them laughed wildly.

'Maybe I will sleep out under the stars.'

'Your option, man. What did you say the temperature was this morning?'

The laughter was contagious.

'I am stuffed. How did I ever let you talk me into this trip?'

'Actually, Sandy, I thought you talked me into it.'

'Fire up the van, young man, take me to exotic new places.'

Matt engaged second gear.

'Your wish is my command.'

The chatter continued as the battered old white Commer van churned out the kilometres. When they were in sight of the ocean the water was of the darkest, most intense shade of blue, with the late winter sun reflecting sharply off the lazily moving waves. When the road took them away from the coast, the surrounding bush, and farmland, was of the most vivid green. Sandy, more used to the brownish hues of his homeland was completely blown away.

'My God! The colours here are incredible. I think I'm going to take up painting. There is just such an intensity to it all, merely taking photos wouldn't do it justice.'

'Yeah, you know, New Zealand really has a shade of green that you can only find here. I guess it's all a bit new for you, coming from the sunburnt country.'

'Man, you can say that again.' Sandy pointed further down the road. 'Hey look, there's a pub, and it actually looks pretty packed.'

Matt looked at the two story wooden structure, surrounded by tall trees on one side, and a full car park on the other.

'I wonder what's going on. It's pretty early for people to be on the booze. Well, us excluded, of course. I meant normal people.'

As Matt slowed down, and searched for a place where the van wouldn't get blocked in, the sounds of rock music wafted out over the car park. Sandy was instantly enthused.

'What a classic, Matt, there's a band playing. How did you manage that? This is some tour you've planned.'

'I phoned ahead yesterday. I told them my Aussie mate was on the prowl, and to see what they could organise. Tomorrow the mayor of Dunedin will be expecting us, to give you the keys to the city. We know how to look after tourists here, boy!'

The two of them were laughing as they got out of the van.

'That's exactly the treatment I was expecting. Keep up the good work.'

As they entered the pub, the noise level went through the roof. There were no spare tables, and little room even for standing. They both pushed their way across the room to the bar. Having to virtually yell at the barman, they ordered a couple of beers. With their drinks in hand, they navigated their way through the throngs of noisy partygoers around to the back of the room, looking

for an empty spot.

'Here, this will do us.' yelled Sandy.

They both leaned up against the back wall of the room, and took in the scene. Obviously the event was well under way, as a lot of the customers looked like they had already consumed more than their fair share of alcohol. Conversation was limited by the loud strains of the hard rock being played more than efficiently by the band on the stage over to the left side of the bar. The two of them limited themselves to facial expressions, and the occasional yelled comment, usually lost to the recipient. As the beer flowed, the music just seemed to get better and better. In turns they fought their way to the bar to replenish their drinks. Sandy, on one of his beer runs, somehow managed to get talking to a rather pretty girl, with long dark hair, who was also waiting her turn to be served at the bar. Matt couldn't fathom how they could manage to chat, the noise level was so high, but manage it they did. Shortly thereafter Sandy returned with just one beer in hand, which he promptly handed to Matt, yelled something completely unintelligible, and then disappeared into the crowd dancing in front of the band. Matt assumed that there was also a long-haired girl somewhere in there as well. Matt had never understood how he did it, but Sandy seemed to have a sort of magnetism about him which drew women, and usually good looking ones, to him. Even if the possibility arose, Matt couldn't be bothered with having to go through the yelling things backwards and forwards scenario of a possible conversation, things that would be almost certainly lost in the thundering racket of the music. It all seemed like far too much work. He was content to just kick back, sup on his beer, and listen to the rather pleasant music. He felt totally unshackled. It felt good to be in a situation with no plans, no commitments, no schedule to follow. There would be no rules to govern his day. The road would be their guide.

By the time Sandy eventually reappeared Matt had already made a couple more booze runs. Sandy pointed to his wrist, where his watch would have been, if he had had one, and gestured with his head to leave. Matt nodded in agreement, finished his beer, and they both headed for the door. They exited into the dark of night, a coldness in the air had set in.

'They certainly know how to live down south.' said Sandy.

'It looks like you do, too. You seem to have adapted pretty well. How did you get on with that bird?'

Sandy laughed.

'I've got her phone number, or anyway, someone's phone number. There was a bit of a story attached to just whose number it actually was, but I couldn't really

hear all the details. Not that it matters anyway, we will be long gone tomorrow, so...'

'So at least one of our pure Kiwi girls will be spared from being defiled by an insatiable Aussie predator.'

'Well that's a bit of a harsh interpretation of what is merely considered to be the dating game.'

'I sincerely hope that I haven't insulted your good reputation, my dear fellow.'

Sandy pulled the grumpiest face he was capable of, as they jumped into the van.

'Let's have no more talk like that, my jealous friend.'

'Uh-huh.'

They both looked at each other, smiling heartily.

'There was a 'Happy Birthday' banner sellotaped to the side of the bar. Did you see it? Apparently she is a friend of whoever's birthday it is.'

'Yeah, I did. That's always a good excuse for a party. And for a couple of gate-crashers like us. Well, let's look for a place to park up for the night. Do we need to find something to eat, as well?'

'Not for me, Matt, I'm not really that hungry. After that exquisite lunch, and a few beers, I could easily do with just hitting the sack. I'm worn out.'

'To be honest, I'm pretty right myself. Let's just find a good spot, and in the morning we will look for a place for a good fry-up.'

Sandy laughed.

'A fry-up? Are you kidding me?'

'Well, then, we'll look for a place that does bacon and eggs for me, and muesli and fruit salad for you. Deal?'

Sandy's only reply was to laugh. His evening's success had left him in a good mood.

'There are plenty of roads going down to the beach,' said Matt, 'Let's just go down one of them, and park up in a beach car park.'

'Drive on, my man.'

Matt turned down a narrow road with a sign saying merely, but rather succinctly, 'To Beach', and continued on to the car park. As he reached the rather small car park he swung the van wide, and then turned sharply, spinning the wheels in the sand, to get the van facing back towards the entranceway. Once he was in the right position, he braked sharply, bringing the van to a standstill.

'Whoa! Hey, thanks for the warning!'

Sandy had almost been thrown from his seat by the sharp manoeuvre.

'Dude, you will be thanking me in the morning. Pushing this van backwards through sand is definitely the worst gig going.'

'I think I'm getting an idea of what this trip is going to be like.'

'Hey listen, Mulligory stew, stunning beaches, a live band with a long-haired beauty thrown in for good measure, and this is just day one. What have you got to moan about?'

'Yeah, when you put it that way, you're right. No complaints here.' said Sandy, smiling contentedly.

'OK, let's put as much of this shit as we can on the front seats, and get as much free space as possible for sleeping.'

The two of them got down to work, and transferred all their various backpacks, cartons of food, water containers etc. onto the front seats, and got out their sleeping bags, which they each laid out on their respective mattresses.

'Have you got enough legroom Sandy?'

'Actually I have, if I lay sideways across the mattress. What about you?'

'Like a bloody king.'

'I'm still pretty tired from last night, so I'm good and ready to crash.'

'Well, you certainly need to get as much beauty sleep as possible, that's for sure.'
The last sounds of the day in the van were those of the two of them chuckling.

The first light of the new day glared into the inner recesses of the van, having been reborn as a camper. However, that rebirth had really only involved little more than the throwing in of a couple of mattresses, so the lack of curtains meant that sleeping in much after the arrival of the first rays of the sun would be arduous, if not indeed impossible. First up was Sandy, who slid open the sliding side door, and, wrapped in his unzipped sleeping bag, stepped out into the early morning glare. Shortly after him came Matt, who had put on a jumper, and was zipping up his jacket.

'A bit colder than Sydney in the morning, huh?'

'A bit? You're fucking kidding! It's freezing.'

'Actually I was debating whether to have an early morning swim or not.'

Sandy laughed.

'I assume it was a pretty short debate?'

Matt also laughed.

'Yeah, in truth it was little more than a fleeting thought. I might wait for the afternoon sun for that.'

The two of them stood looking along the totally deserted beach.

'Nice place, this country of yours Matt.'

'You haven't seen anything yet.'

'Well, what I have seen, I like. What's for breakfast. I'm starving.'

'Yeah, me too. First place we come across will do, what do you say?'

'I say get the van fired up.'

'First I'm gonna wash my face, and brush my teeth. I've still got the taste of beer in my mouth.'

'Go easy on that water. I'm in charge of filling it up, remember?'

Matt shook his head, laughing.

'I just knew I picked the wrong man for the wrong job.'

With much yawning and stretching the two of them prepared themselves, and the van, for the coming day's requirements. Within short order Matt had the van cruising back out towards State Highway 1, and then turned left, in the direction of Dunedin. After a brief excursion inland, out of sight of the sea, they found themselves back along the coast.

'Shit, it's really nice here, Matt. Not a lot of places to eat at, though.'

'No, the South Island is pretty deserted. It really does need some more coffee shops. I guess out here, in these areas, there just aren't enough people to justify that.'

'Hey, turn left here!' yelled Sandy, pointing ahead in a somewhat excited state.

Matt followed his orders, and then enquired:

'What's up, man?'

'Didn't you see the sign?' Sandy, looking back, was beside himself with laughter.

'No, what?'

'This place is called 'Shag Point', can you believe that?'

Matt laughed.

'Are you sure you aren't still thinking about last night's possibilities?'

Sandy, in reply, just gave him the middle finger.

'OK, OK. We'll definitely check it out. No need for such undignified behaviour, young man. That's not how your mother brought you up.'

A few hundred metres down the road they came to the 'Shag Point Lookout'.

'Wow, look over there.'

'Sorry man, parking business first. Hold onto your hats.'

The empty parking area to the right was ample, but the long wheel based van required quite a bit of turning space. Matt sharply spun the van around on the gravel covered car park, and came to a halt. Sandy had learnt to hold on tight during such proceedings.

'OK, let's have a look, then.'

The two of them jumped out of the van, and walked over the road, and onto the wooden lookout structure. The rocky terrain, with the wild ocean waves

crashing onto it was stunning. The ocean waves were pounding violently against the jagged shoreline. A slight morning mist still hung in the air, giving it all an other world, bewitching sort of beauty. The billowing clouds floating through the sky at quite a fast pace only added to the dreamlike feel of the place. They both felt as though they had been transported to a mystical dimension. Excitedly Sandy pointed down towards the rocky coast.

'Hey Matt, look! Are they penguins, down there?'

Matt burst out laughing.

'You really are far from home, aren't you? They're seals.'

'Really? Do you have penguins as well?'

'Yeah, of course. We've got everything down here. All around the South Island there are plenty of colonies of them.'

'Man, am I loving this.'

'Hey, I'm starving. Let's hit the road.'

'Yeah, me too. Hey, stop at the turn off, I want to get a photo of the 'Shag Point' sign. No one will believe there's a place called that.'

'OK, sure, it is a bit of a laugh.'

With the van already facing the right direction, the two of them returned along the narrow road towards the main highway.

'Hey, pull the van up near the sign. I will get you in there, too.'

Matt drove the van onto the wrong side of the road, as close as he could get to the sign. Sandy jumped out, rummaged around in the back of the van, found his camera, and walked over the road to set up the shot.

'OK, wave your arm out the window! Yup, that's it, got it.' Sandy jumped back in the van. 'What a cracker.'

'Look, man,' said Matt pointing across the road at another sign. 'Palmerston is only 15 k's down the road. There should be some good choices there for breakfast. The day has indeed started well.'

The road left the coast, and headed inland. All along the sides of the road were lush green paddocks, with many flocks of sheep.

'No shortage of sheep down here, then Matt?'

'Nope. Lamb meat and wool are a couple of our biggest exports. And here's you a vegetarian.'

They both laughed.

'Actually I thought you were, too. You know, Mulligory stew and all that? You definitely were the last time I saw you. Now you're talking about bacon and eggs for breakfast. What happened?'

'Yeah, well. Long story. I have surrendered to the many temptations. Although, I

still do eat mainly a vegetarian diet. Regrettably I just couldn't resist the many tasty delights we have. For one, bacon and egg pies. I just love them.'

Sandy laughed.

'Well, since it's confession time...'

Matt looked over at his friend incredulously.

'What? You too?'

'Let's just say that I'm not as fanatical as I once was.'

'The mind is willing, but the flesh is weak.'

'I prefer, the mind is willing, but the flesh can be awfully tempted.'

The two of them laughed freely.

'Yes, indeed, that does sound better.'

'Hey, look Matt, Palmerston! Breakfast.'

'Nice one.'

State Highway 1 cruised right through the middle of the town.

'There you go Matt, 'Dave's Fish and Chip' shop.'

'Bit early, brother, maybe later on, after that swim. Hey, here we go. 'Bakery and Tearooms'. This is the business. Listen, let me warn you, this is where parking gets a bit more difficult.'

Matt pulled the van over into the last parking spot before a corner, but because of the wide swing in, by the time the van had straightened up, it had overshot the parking place.

'Your job starts officially now. Push us back a bit, mate.'

Sandy jumped out, and pushed the van back the necessary 5 metres, or so. He threw up his hands triumphantly, and grinned broadly.

'Piece of cake!'

Matt also jumped out of the van, and slapped him on the back.

'Nice one, I knew I had chosen the right man for the job. Well done. Breakfast time.'

The combined bakery and tearoom was nothing particularly flash, but it looked clean, and the food looked freshly cooked, and pretty appetising. There was a self-service system where you took a tray, and plates, and walked along the row of heated display units, each with its different food types, meat pies, sausage rolls, sandwiches, etc. Sandy was obviously impressed.

'Wow, these don't look like the pies we get in Aus. Those are sort of factory produced heart exploders. These look really good.'

'Yeah, over here we have taken the art of the pie to a whole new level. Well, in these sorts of places, anyway. You still get those mass produced ones here, too. There is just no comparison. I'm going for a curry chicken pie, and a sausage

roll.'

'Well, we did have a vegetarian day yesterday, so I might join you there. What do you recommend?'

'I think you should stay away from the steak and kidney pies, you are definitely not man enough to handle those.'

Sandy took no offence, and entered into the banter.

'True, it might not mix well with the Mulligory stew. I still haven't completely digested that.'

'In fact, I thought I better give you a day off from the stew. You know, break you into it slowly. Curry chicken pies, and mince pies are probably on the lighter side, as far as meat content goes. I think you better avoid the sausage rolls. They are only for the heavily committed.'

Sandy took his friends advice, and decided to try the curry chicken. They made their selections, and went to the girl on the cash register, where they both ordered a black filter coffee. As they were paying Matt took the opportunity to get some information from her.

'How far is it down to Dunedin from here?'

'Only about half an hour.'

'Roughly how many kilometres is that?'

'Actually, I'm not really sure, about 50 I think.'

Sandy laughed.

'Well, that's going to take us a lot longer than half an hour then. We are on the tortoise express.'

The serving girl looked surprised, and asked what that meant. Matt looked sideways at his friend with a sham look of slight disdain, and decided that a fuller explanation was required.

'We are travelling in a van which is powered by rubber bands. Luckily when they fail we have an expert pusher available.' He nodded towards Sandy. 'He doesn't look like much, but when push comes to shove... Well, you know what I mean.'

The girl laughed, and said:

'Maybe you better get some more pies in then. You know, a bit of energy for all that pushing.'

The boys laughed as they headed over to a table, and sat down.

'Anyway, how long do you want to stay in Dunedin, Matt?'

'No idea. I wouldn't mind trying to find a bit of work, to boost my petrol fund. Christchurch left me a bit on the broke side. What about you?'

'I've got a bit of dosh, but I could probably use a bit more, too. We'll see what

we can find.' He took a bite of his pie. 'Hey, nice pie! Well recommended.'

'Well, Felicity is a vegetarian, and differently to us bodgers, she actually is a real one. So enjoy your pies while you can.'

'Oh, I'm sure we will be able to sneak out in the dead of night, if needs be.'

Matt was in full agreement.

'Just in case of emergency, of course.'

'Is she expecting us?'

'Yeah, sure. I called her a few days ago. Actually, I've got some rough directions to her place, but I think we will probably end up asking around.'

With hearty appetite, they finished their breakfasts.

'Man, that was nice. I'm ready for whatever the day brings. Let's do it, Matt. Let's hit the big smoke. Dunedin.'

'I like the way you think.'

They strolled back to the van, fired it up, and Matt pulled out onto the highway, for their triumphant run into Dunedin. Barely ten kilometres out of Palmerston there was a loud explosion, and Matt suddenly lost control of the steering wheel. Everything went into slow motion for him. He had to fight to keep the van straight on the road. The van wanted to turn sharp left. He slammed his foot on the brake to just find that his limited control of the van dramatically worsened. He quickly took his foot off the brake pedal, and fought with the steering wheel until the van came slowly to a halt by itself. Matt was totally stunned, and somewhat shaken. Sandy also was stupefied.

'My God, what the fuck was that Matt?'

'I've got no idea.'

The two of them jumped out of the van, and had a look around. The back left side tyre had blown out.

'All that just because of a flat tyre?' Sandy was incredulous.

'I guess so. This van has a long chassis, which is actually why we can get two mattresses into it, but I guess this is another consequence of that. Shit, you know what?'

'What, man?'

'This is a blown back tyre. If one of the front ones had blown, I doubt I would have been able to control it at all. It was hard enough as it was.'

Sandy was totally unimpressed.

'Well that's reassuring. The possibility of certain death awaits us at any given moment.'

Matt nodded, and shrugged his shoulders.

'Welcome to life!'

'Anyway, do we have a spare?'

'Yeah, but I've got no idea if it's in a good state, I haven't actually checked it of late. Let's find out.'

The spare tyre was in a sort of metal triangular cage under the back of the van. Matt lay down on the road to see how to get it out.

'The good news is, the tyres pumped full, and looks good. The bad news is I've got no idea how to get it out. Hey, can you have a look just above me if there is some sort of way to lower the tyre?'

Sandy opened the back doors, lifted up the mattress, and had a look around.

'Actually there is. There is a sort of hole with what looks like a nut head in it. Where's the wheel brace?' He rummaged around in the back of the van. 'Hold on, I've found it, it's in the side compartment here. Let me see if I can wind down the spare.'

Using the wheel brace Sandy tried all four of the possible nut sizes, until he found the right one.

'Here she comes.'

'Nice one, Sandy. Just a bit more, and I can unhook it. OK, stop. I've got it.'

Matt dragged out the spare tyre. Sandy pulled out the jack from the side compartment of the van, and they both got to work. Jacking up the heavy van was no easy task. But with plenty of elbow grease, and just the right amount of cursing, they eventually managed to complete the process of changing the tyres over.

'Shall we get the tyre fixed in Dunedin, or go back to Palmerston, Matt?'

'We go back. I don't want to be driving without a spare. That's just asking for trouble. We may as well fill up the tank while we are at it.'

They threw the flat tyre in the back of the van, and put away the jack. Sandy looked at Matt with a cheeky grin.

'Is this a good sign for the trip, or an indication of trouble brewing?'

Matt turned to his friend, and smiled.

'Are you kidding me, Sandy? Obviously it's a good sign. It means we can handle anything they throw at us.'

'Well, I like your style of interpretation. Very positive. Hey, any chance of another pie while we are back there? You know, before we hit the true vegetarian scene.'

'Just get in the van.'

Chapter Three: City in the South

The dinner couldn't have been more successful. Sandy smiled contentedly, sat back, and threw his hands behind his head in a sign of total satisfaction.

'That was fantastic, Felicity, thanks a lot. You're really a fantastic cook.'

'My pleasure.' replied Felicity, beaming with joy.

She was warming quickly to Matt's friend. Compliments always helped with that, and Sandy was the master of ingratiating compliments. Especially where women were concerned.

'It's a far cry from some of the fare I have been subjected to lately.' Sandy's caustic level was turned up to its highest setting. Those ingratiating compliments of his were best served out sparingly. And usually just to women.

'Fancy coming on a road trip?'

Felicity laughed, as pleased as punch, and then turned her attention to Matt.

'What did the two of you do all day? I'm so sorry there was no one here to let you in. I told my flatmates to let you in if they saw you, but they are nowhere to be found today. As usual, really.'

Matt shook his head.

'Hey, don't worry. We parked the van outside here, and went off exploring on foot. Actually the directions you gave me were really good. We only had to ask one person for help. Not bad for a town the size of Dunedin, and a couple of hopeless bodgers like us.'

Sandy hadn't finished, he was on a roll with his compliments, there would be no holding him back.

'It's a really nice town, Felicity. Incredibly diverse architecture. I love it. I could walk around for days. In fact, I probably will.'

'Thanks Sandy, I'm glad you like it. It really is a lovely place. It's a good size, not too big, and not too small. The student population keeps the place lively, as well.'

Sandy's interest was piqued.

'Is it a university town?'

'For sure. We have one of the most important unis in the country down here. The place is absolutely flooded with students. Good for me, it makes it easy to keep

a steady flow of students coming through the house. Without them, I wouldn't be able to afford to pay the mortgage.'

'I love your house,' said Matt, 'it's got real character. It's a good old New Zealand, well-built abode.'

Felicity sighed.

'It looks good, I agree, but actually, unfortunately, it's got a lot of issues. The plumbing sucks, and there's plenty of rot as well, hidden away in the walls. These old houses all have problems, but it was all I could afford. Eventually I'm gonna have to find some money to fix it up.'

'Hey, listen, all in all you are really doing well,' replied Matt. 'You've bought your own place, your job seems to be going well. You're really flying up that ladder.'

'I know. Although, I sort of have to keep reminding myself of that. It's just that I really would like to open my own restaurant, but that dream doesn't seem to be getting any closer. For one thing, I would have to sell my house, which would mean paying rent, and..' she sighed, 'it all just seems to be endless.'

Sandy pointed at himself and Matt. He almost couldn't hold himself back any more.

'You see us two? He's got a clapped out old van with no reverse gear, and I've got nothing but the clothes I'm wearing. You are waaay ahead of us two bums.' All three of them laughed. The two bottles of wine they had consumed with the dinner Felicity had cooked went a long way in helping with that.

'I should count my blessings then.'

The laughter was contagious. The mood was good. Felicity addressed the two of them.

'Hey, you know, you can stay as long as you want. I hope the couch will be comfortable enough for you Sandy. Other friends that have passed through have found it alright.'

Sandy reached in deep to find the suitable level of sarcasm.

'I doubt that it will be the equal of sleeping scrunched up in the back of Matt's van, but you can't have everything in life can you?'

'Actually you can,' laughed Matt, holding out the key to his van to Sandy.

Sandy roared with laughter.

'I might just keep that as a back-up plan for now. But thanks.'

Matt continued to dangle the key. Felicity yawned.

'I'm so tired. I'm just gonna clean up, and hit the sack, I think. Tomorrow morning I'm off work, so we can go down to a coffee shop for breakfast, and maybe start looking for some jobs for you. What do you say?'

Sandy stood up.

'Listen, you two head off to bed, I'll sort out the dishes.'

Felicity was delighted.

'That would be wonderful! Thank you! I'll show you where everything goes. The plates...'

Sandy stopped her in her tracks, by placing an arm on her shoulder.

'Felicity, it's a kitchen. I know how they work. I'll find out where to put things. Don't worry, off you go.'

Matt slapped his friend on the back.

'Thanks, man.'

Felicity and Matt headed towards the bedroom. Matt called back from the corridor:

'I'll leave the key on the sideboard, just in case you change your mind. You can even have the long mattress.'

As Sandy was rolling up his sleeves, he smiled, and called back:

'Tempting offer, good fellow, you have a heart of gold.'

The next morning, after all necessary sleeping had been accomplished, and morning ablutions completed, Felicity opened the front door, and the three of them walked out onto the wooden verandah which ran along the whole front of the house. A pallid sun was just rising above the skyline. The air was slightly misty, and rather damp.

'Shit, it's really cold in the morning!' said Matt.

'Well, it's only really the end of winter, and we are in the deep south.' replied Felicity.

Sandy pointed at the road, in surprise.

'Hey look, there's a layer of ice on the road! Matt, if you were to move the van even a bit you would move onto the ice, and it would just slide down the hill.'

Matt was slightly taken aback, looking at the thin layer of black ice on the road.

'Bloody hell. How do people get to work in the mornings here?'

Felicity threw up her arms, laughing.

'Very carefully! Although, luckily I'm in a pretty good spot here. You can walk just about everywhere. I'll point everything out to you as we go downtown.'

As they carefully navigated their way down the slight hill Felicity's house was on, towards the main road, Felicity pointed out the principal directions.

'Ten minutes straight on down, and you are in the city centre. From there down to the port it's only about another ten-minute walk. Straight across to the right from here there is a lovely park. Over there on the left, is the hospital. Actually they are quite often looking for casual workers. That would be worth a look.'

They hire direct, so you just need to go to the reception, and fill in an application.'

'Hey, I like that.' said Matt. 'I will pop in there this arvo. Not sure if I would like wheeling around dead bodies, but I could probably handle working with the soon-to-be dead.'

Felicity laughed.

'Just put that right there on the application form. I'm sure they will snap you up straight away.'

Matt turned to Sandy.

'What about you, Sandy? Give it a try with me?'

'Not a chance. Those places remind me too much of my mortality. When I was visiting a dying aunt in hospital she warned me to steer clear of those places. I'm sticking with her advice.'

Matt in response went philosophical.

'Well, we know where we come from, we may as well know where we are headed.'

Felicity decided it was time to put an end to all such morbid talk.

'Listen, you two, any more of this and you will put me off my breakfast. Can we change the topic, please? Oh hey, Matt. What's the story with touring the South Island in a van with no first gear, or reverse gear? That sounds a bit optimistic, don't you think? You do know it's all hills and mountains down here, right?'

Matt acted surprised.

'What? New Zealand hilly? I didn't get that memo.'

Sandy felt it was time for him to intervene.

'Actually, that's where I come into it. When he gets himself into a tight spot, the Aussie puts his shoulder to the wheel, his nose to the grindstone.'

Matt smiled, and nodded towards Sandy.

'He's my reverse gear.'

'OK, then, if you think that will work. Do you think you will conquer the Haast Pass like that?' asked Felicity.

'What's the Haast Pass?' asked Sandy, his curiosity aroused.

Matt shrugged him off.

'It's just a rugby expression. A sort of way to pass the ball.' replied Matt, signalling to Felicity to keep quiet.

Felicity laughed.

'So, I will expect to see you back this way before too long, then?'

Matt raised his arms.

'Why on earth would we not return to such a fair town?'

Sandy knew he was being misled.

'Secrets have a habit of coming out in the end, you know.'

'I'm sure you can push through them, you know, with your shoulder to the wheel, etc. Noses to grindstones.' laughed Matt. 'Hey, this looks like a good place for breakfast. What do you say? Guess what Felicity? Sandy loves our Kiwi pies.'

Felicity stopped in her tracks.

'What? I thought you were both vegetarians.'

'Oops, yeah that's right. Long story.'

Each time that Matt would feel he was just about finishing to sort out the monstrous pile of dirty dishes and pots, someone would roll in another trolley full of yet more of them to wash.

'Here's ward three, Matt. Enjoy.'

'Thanks, Susie, I owe you one.'

'Oh, my pleasure.' she laughed. 'And just in case you thought that was the last one... it isn't.'

The money was reasonable, but the work was absolutely mind numbing. Only a few days had passed into Matt's new job as the official washer-upper of the lunchtime gig at the Dunedin hospital, yet somehow it already felt like he had been there for months. In truth, he had wanted a job, needed a job really, but he had been hoping for something a bit more interesting, if not even slightly challenging. Still, his travelling fund was low, so he had been forced to accept the first position going. To make matters worse he, and all the others in that Edwardian Workhouse, were always under the watchful, indeed hawkish, eye of Mrs. Watson, the stout omnipresent woman in charge of the kitchen. Nothing escaped her beady roving eye, and her booming voice could always be heard, chastising someone, or barking commands to someone else. Charles Dickens would have had a field day with her. It almost seemed like a mini-miracle when Matt would finally realise that he had actually finished for the day. In fact he would rush to clock out, secretly fearing that someone would turn up with yet another trolley load of tears, and Mrs. Watson's thundering voice would call him back to his requisite place of humble servitude. He had quickly fallen into the almost necessary habit of stopping off at a pub on the way back to Felicity's place, to wash away all memories of the slavlike conditions of the hospital kitchen.

That particular evening, the house was quiet when Matt arrived. The daylight had long since given way to the dark of night, even though it was still

relatively early. In reality it was already starting to get dark when he would leave the hospital. The late winter days were incredibly short. He knew that he wouldn't see Felicity until late that evening, as she was doing the dinner shift in the vegetarian restaurant where she worked. He had half expected to find Sandy there, but he wasn't, so he decided to just have a shower, and go back to the pub for another couple of beers. He needed them, badly. He wasn't sure if he could handle the sight of any more food that day, after all the bedraggled leftovers he had been obliged to scrape off the eternal flow of plates returning from the wards. Although, probably he would have to force down something. Maybe there would be something to eat at the pub? Just as he was making his way up the stairs the phone rang. He raced back down.

'Hello?'

'Oh, finally! I've been ringing for ages.'

'Hi Sandy, yeah I stopped off for a few beers. Where are you?'

'I'm downtown. Hey, I've found a great looking Indian place. Are you up for a curry?'

'Yeah, sure. Is it licensed or BYO?'

'What does that mean?'

'BYO means you can take your own booze, literally 'Bring Your Own', and they just charge you an opening fee, rather than actually buying the booze from them. That can get expensive.'

'Hang on, I'll see if I can see anything written out the front.'

The line went quiet for a couple of minutes, then Sandy returned.

'Well, they have BYO written on the front window, so...'

'Yup, that's it. Where is the place?'

'Well, you remember where the Salvation Army clothes shop is? Where I picked up that jumper the other day? It's pretty much straight over the road from there.'

'Nice one, not far from here then. Listen, I'm gonna jump in the shower, and I'll see you there at about 7.30. What do you say?'

'Perfect.'

'I'm gonna pick up some beer. You want some?'

'No, I'll look for a bottle of wine. I saw a shop with some nice wines from Australia. A bit of a taste from home.'

Matt laughed.

'You feeling homesick already?'

'No, you idiot, I just like wine which happens to come from my part of the world.'

'OK, OK, I've got the idea.' said Matt, still quietly laughing. 'I'll see you there soon.'

The long hot shower Matt had taken had not only succeeded in washing away the built up layers of fatty leftover food that almost seemed to seep into his skin, but had also managed to warm him up. He felt almost human again. The deep south was actually a lot colder than what he had been expecting. In fact he noticed on his way down to the restaurant that the streets in the city centre were almost void of people. Walking down to the restaurant was almost like walking through a ghost town. Although, it must be said, a particularly beautiful ghost town. He guessed that when the cold veil of darkness fell most people would be tucked up somewhere near a warm fire. Probably that would be a good place to be. In short time he found himself in the right location, and entered the Indian restaurant, six pack of beer in his hand. He quickly spotted Sandy at a table by the window, and wandered over.

'Just what is it you actually do all day, anyway Sandy?'

Matt took a seat.

'Hello to you, too. Don't you worry, I fill in my days quite easily. Actually, I'm loving it. It's a really nice place to discover, just by walking around. You know, it's almost impossible to find two houses that have the same style. They are all so unique. Even Felicity's place is really interesting.'

'That's true. All of New Zealand has a kind of Colonial style of housing. Sort of English style, but built out of wood. Dunedin, on the other hand, really has its own singular style. People put it down to the presence of the Scottish settlers, but whilst I think that did have a big influence, really I think that also the early city planners must have wanted to build something completely different from the rest of the country. Something unparalleled. They certainly achieved that. The architecture is definitely impressive.'

'Plus I love walking around the harbour. To walk all around to the other side actually takes quite a while. There's a boating club over there with a marina full of incredible little sailing ships. I'm keeping myself pretty busy, and doing a lot of exercise, too.'

The waitress came over to get their drinks from them.

'I'll put the beer in the fridge, and open the wine for you. Are you ready to order?'

'Actually, to be honest I...'

Matt hadn't even looked at the menu. Sandy had.

'Hey listen Matt, there's a special of the day for two people, with a bit of everything, from starters right through to a few mains, and a dessert. What do you say to that?'

Matt closed the menu, which he had only just opened.

'Amen, brother. Bring it on.'

'Great. I'll bring you your drinks, and take the order to the kitchen.'

'Thanks ever so much.' Sandy was always the gentleman. Well, whenever women were involved, that is.

'So, basically Sandy, you aren't really even looking for a job?'

Sandy threw his head back with laughter.

'Now, what on earth makes you think that?' he replied, still laughing. 'I am sort of looking, but, as you have so wisely observed, not with any great alacrity.

Although, as it happens I am formulating a plan.'

That got Matt's attention.

'A plan? Now that sounds intriguing. Pray tell.'

They were interrupted by the waitress placing the opened bottle of wine on the table, and a can of beer, along with their glasses.

'When you want another beer, let me know.'

'Actually, I'm ready already. You don't want to know the day I've had.'

The waitress giggled as she walked away.

'So Sandy, tell me about this plan of yours.'

'Well, this tour of the South Island would seem to inevitably end up in Nelson.

That would be the logical conclusion, if we were to go all the way around the South Island. I've been reading a tour guide I picked up at a tourist information centre, and Nelson seems to be a pretty nice place.'

'Yeah, it is. Also it's a lot warmer than down here. I was there for a while before heading down to Christchurch.'

'In fact it says that it's the place with the most sunshine hours per year in all New Zealand, which sounds good to me.'

Matt seemed impressed.

'Is that a fact? That does sound good. Well, I hadn't really thought about it, but you are right. If we go all the way around the South Island we will end up back up north, pretty much in Nelson. The question is do you have enough money to get that far?'

'Yeah, I think I can manage that. We aren't spending much money staying at Felicity's place, and eating here is pretty cheap. How long do you want to work at the hospital?'

'If I can last three weeks total, I would be pretty happy. Our main expense will really be petrol money, when we get back on the road.'

'Yeah, the Mulligory stew doesn't set us back much.'

Neither could help himself from laughing.

'Hey, don't insult my veggie stew! It's nourishing, tasty, and bloody cheap. What more do you want?'

Sandy was in full agreement, although ever so slightly playfully.

'Don't worry. It's already my favourite meal. I'll be eating this Indian food, but I'll be secretly dreaming of the Mulligory stew.'

Matt's demeanour turned momentarily serious.

'Talking about food. You wouldn't believe the amount of stuff we have to throw away at the hospital. I'm always tempted to eat some of it, but that is actually something that will get you fired.'

'Shit, that is disgusting. What? Eating some dying patients leftovers? The thought of that makes me sick. How could that even remotely tempt you?'

'Oh, for fucks sake listen, you idiot. Each day they have a choice of two main meat dishes, let's say for example chicken breasts and lamb chops. Basically they cook enough of each one, in case everyone chooses that. In the end there are trays of food still in the oven that aren't needed. When all has been decided, and all choices assigned, I have the onerous task of taking them from the oven, tipping the contents into the waste bin, and then washing the trays. No one has gone near it. It's such a waste, and actually a real temptation to have a bite here and there.'

'Have you ever succumbed?'

The waitress interrupted their conversation by placing their starters on the table, along with Matt's second beer, and some sauces.

'Thanks.' said Matt, who then returned to the subject in hand. 'I have, obviously, but you have to be really careful. The woman who runs the show is really vigilant. She's everywhere, and she is not the sort of person you want to mess with. I've worked out a bit of a cover script. I sort of pretend to have dropped something, bend down to pick it up, and take a quick bite. Then I turn back to my sink and chew it slowly. You wouldn't believe the temptation, especially with the aroma of freshly cooked lamb chops. Man, that kills me.'

'Wow, what a waste. You would think they would at least donate it to dog shelters, or something.'

'Yeah, some bloody stupid hospital hygiene rule that has gone way out of control.'

'Anyway,' Sandy raised his glass. 'Cheers, my friend. I am absolutely loving all this. I'm so glad I came over.'

Matt also raised his glass.

'Yeah, me too, mate. It's so good to see you again, and you really turned up at the right moment for me. All the omens are looking spot on for a good trip.

Cheers to you, my good man.'

The early morning chill had given way to a rather pleasant somewhat cloudy day, albeit still fairly cool. Luckily the walking they had already done had managed to warm them up slightly.

'Was I right, or was I right?'

Felicity had a rather elated tone to her voice, and a sort of expectancy. Her long blonde hair was bunched up inside a rainbow coloured beanie, with just a few locks of hair falling down across her pretty smiling face.

'Man, that's for sure. It's incredible out here.'

'Plus, it's just barely a few kilometres out of the city. When I need to recharge my batteries I can be out here in a flash.'

The rocky outcrops of Cape Saunders lay below them. The wild waves were being thrown by the strong currents against the sturdy rock formations. Behind them was the greenest of wild native bush, interspersed with grassy patches. It was raw, and wild. A rugged beauty that could be appreciated even on a not particularly sunny day. In fact, possibly its beauty was, if anything, even more enhanced on such a day. Felicity pointed down to Allans beach.

'That is my favourite beach of all. It's sort of in a cove. I don't know, there's just something about it that really appeals to me.'

'Yeah, it looks really good. I must say though, at high tide it would appear that most of the beach gets covered.'

Felicity laughed.

'Actually it does. You have to get the timing pretty spot on.'

'It's hard to believe that we are only about ten k's out of town. It's so isolated, and empty of people. It feels like it's a million miles away from civilisation.'

Felicity nodded in agreement.

'Just great for shooting out to let out a bit of stress. Sometimes my flatmates get on my nerves a bit.'

'Actually, I've hardly even seen them.'

'No, the two I've got now are pretty good. They spend most of their time over at friends' places. To be honest, I think they look down on me a bit, because I'm not a student.'

Matt laughed.

'Yeah, that's typical of students. They think they're God's gifts. All done on daddy's paycheck, of course.'

'True. They always moan about the old plumbing, so I imagine they come from wealthy families, with lovely houses.'

'Bloody North Islanders, eh?'

'Yeah,' laughed Felicity. 'I think the deep south is a bit of a culture shock for them. They are definitely out of their comfort zones. Especially the ones from Auckland. They usually hate it down here.'

They sat down on a small piece of grass amidst the rocks. Felicity put her hand around Matt's arm, and cuddled up to him.

'Hey Matt, how would you like to go for a weekend down to Stewart Island? I haven't been down there yet, and it sounds really nice. Just the two of us. I know I haven't had much time for you since you've been here, but it's just been so busy at work. We are a bit understaffed at the moment, but I think I can get a weekend off sometime.'

'For sure, that would be great. Hey, don't worry, I understand. It's a bit my fault too. By the time I get home from my gig, you are already off at yours.'

'Yeah, we are definitely on two different work cycles. How's it going there?'

'It's a pretty insane place to work. Basically the kitchen is always working. Either preparing a meal, or cleaning up after one, then straight onto preparing the next one. All the patients seem to do is eat. Mind you, eat and sleep, that's probably about all there is to do when you are in hospital. I quite like my hours, though. 10 till 4.30 really suits me. It's nice to have a bit of a lazy morning. In Christchurch I was up and at it pretty early every day.'

Felicity tightened her grip on Matt's hand.

'I'm really sorry it all went belly up for you there. It sounds like you were really getting somewhere.'

Matt squeezed her hand.

'Hey, no sweat. All part of the learning process. It won't end there. Anyway, it's all come right. I've always wanted to do a tour of the South Island, and with Sandy on board it really is working out. He's a good mate, plus it's pretty necessary to have someone to share the costs. That old van really chews through the gas.'

'And when the trip is over? What's the plan?'

'Well, we are loosely thinking about staying up in Nelson for a while. By the time we get there, if we get there, I will be broke, so it will be time to fill up the

coffers again. Wherever I'm staying, there will always be room for you, if you ever manage to get some holidays.'

Felicity laughed.

'I wish! They really work me hard here.'

'Sort of like fascist vegetarians?'

'Well, let's just say capitalist vegetarians. Let's not get too carried away.'

Through their laughter Felicity continued:

'Anyway, it really is good experience for me. Basically I'm learning all about running a restaurant. It isn't just about being able to cook good food. There also is a lot of important stuff behind the scenes, so when the time is right I will be well placed to start my own place.'

'Competition to the fascists?'

Felicity smiled at the thought.

'Wouldn't that be good? Hopefully I would be able to get a lot of the faithful customers to come to my new place.'

'So, you are pretty keen on staying down here, then?'

'For now, yeah. I really love it here. And it seems to be the place where I am finding my feet. I'm a bit worried that if I leave I will end up having to start all over again.'

'Don't be silly. You take your gained experience with you wherever you go.'

'I know. That's what logic dictates, but I just don't want to upset the apple cart.'

'Fair enough. I know what you mean. When you are on a roll, and all the ducks are lining up, it's best not to change anything. Hey, what say we walk across to the other side? It gets a bit cold when you stop walking. That breeze can really cut into you.'

Felicity playfully punched him on the shoulder.

'Bloody soft northerner. You need to spend a couple of years down here, to stiffen up your backbone.'

Matt laughed, as he stood up.

'True, I'm just a big softie. That's what my mum says, too. My father's not quite so poetic. But that there is a long story.'

The days turned into a gruelling drudge for Matt, on the work front. Dishes, pots, never-ending mountains of filth that needed to be returned to an immaculate pristine state. After one mountain would be conquered, another would soon thereafter be built in its place. It was soul destroying. After the interesting, testing work he had previously been doing, it just all seemed incredibly mundane. Although, on a slightly positive note, because the work

wasn't particularly difficult, requiring little or no concentration, it did give him ample time for reflection. What he had come to associate as having been a total failure in Christchurch was in reality anything but. It had been a good learning curve. Maybe, well almost definitely, he had dived in too deeply too quickly, but there were many positives that he could take out of the experience. It was a base that he could develop, grow something out of. Not like his present position. There were no lessons to be learnt at the sink of never ending despair. The only thing he had discovered was that in the world there seemed to be a never ending amount of dishes to be washed, and then washed again. And that it appeared that he seemed to be solely responsible for that process of restoration. It was an infinite cycle of tedium. He had even started to have nightmares about washing dishes. Dirty pots had started to permeate his hard-earned repose.

That adverse day, that day of days, had started like all the rest, with a mountain of filthy pots and pans to wash, already waiting for him upon his arrival. The dishes would come down from the wards later on. He tried to think happy thoughts to get him through the shift. He had no one to talk to, alone at his sink of despondency. Still, he tried to focus on the money he was earning. Money that would buy him freedom. Freedom to cruise wherever he and Sandy decided. It was a worthwhile trade off. Bad times which would finance good times. Was that how life worked? Periods of boredom interspersed with just a few good times? Was that an acceptable way to live? Could there be a way of combining the two? Like, for example, that which Felicity was doing. Something that would bring better days, but also something that she enjoyed doing immensely. Could he find a similar endeavour? He put such philosophical questions aside, and with renewed vigour he attacked the pile of pots, only to see them be replenished as soon as he would start to make a dent in them. The hours ground past, each one seemingly taking the equivalent of a day. To a certain extent when the trolleys of plates and cutlery started to flow in from the wards he was almost happy. That meant that the end was getting closer. Another shift was inexorably grinding to a close. Because he only worked a six and a half hour shift he wasn't entitled to a break, no doubt the contract had been specially designed with that in mind. So towards the end of each shift an intense hunger would start to set in. Then the torture would begin. The excruciating torture of the delectable forbidden aromas. When all lunch choices had been made, that which had needed to be sent up to the wards had been sent up, then that which remained in the ovens was only considered to be superfluous. Unwanted and unnecessary. At that point he would have the agonising task of extracting the trays of well-cooked food directly from the ovens, and throwing

the sumptuously cooked delights straight into the waste bins. All the while with his stomach groaning in agony. He had been trying to build up a resistance to the savoury aromas that would permeate his world, but one of them, that of grilled lamb chops, got him every time. Plus, with the shape of the meat surrounded by a convenient bone to hold onto, he could never resist the temptation of grabbing one, while tipping the rest into a waste bin, and quickly taking a bite straight out of the middle of the chop. His routine never altered, and had never betrayed him, at least not until that fateful day. That unavoidable day of endings, and new beginnings. One of his trusty ruses was to pretend to drop something, or, indeed, drop the cooking tray, and whilst in the act of bending down, take that succulent forbidden bite. Then with his back turned on the kitchen staff at his sink of uninterrupted solitude he would delicately chew the tender meat. Really, it was difficult enough for him to take only one bite. He would have loved, indeed craved, to sink his teeth into many of them. Such was the intense desire summoned up by the delectable aroma that would invade his world upon opening the oven. In fact it had been lamb chops that had brought an end to his couple of years of being totally vegetarian. There was just something about them, not only the aroma, and taste, but something more intrinsic. They evoked memories, and tastes, of his childhood. Growing up, lamb chops had always been considered somewhat of a treat for the family. A special meal that the kids would always look forward to. And his mother had really known how to cook them well. They meant more to him than just delicious tasty food. It was like a combination of taste, and memories of good times of youthful innocent days all rolled into one. It evoked a kaleidoscope of sensations. How could he then resist the temptation, and just have to coldly, and brutally, tip them into the waste bins, as if they meant nothing? How could he turn his back on everything they conjured up to him? That was asking too much of him, indeed, of anyone. Every man had his limits, and Matt's was that of delicately cooked lamb chops.

'OK mister, you know the rules. I've had it with you.'

Mrs Watson's voice boomed across the kitchen. Matt realised, with some great astonishment, that maybe his subtle theatrical performances hadn't gone quite as unnoticed as he had thought.

'That's you done. Off you go. The rules have been spelt out for you. No touching the food! Tomorrow you can pick up your paycheck from the office. Leave everything as it is, and go! Out! Now!'

Matt, whilst more than a little surprised at the turn of events, took one last lingering look at his washing-up station. No, he would definitely not miss that

place. True, he had wanted to earn a bit more money, but probably, all things considered, it was for the best. Enough was enough. Without a word, he took off his protective plastic apron, placed it on the bench next to the sink, and walked out of the kitchen for the last time. Outside, feeling a sense of having broken his shackles and escaped his serfdom, he breathed in the exuberant air of freedom. It was over.

Sandy was lying on the couch reading a book, when Matt walked in. Felicity was walking down the stairs, obviously getting ready for her evening shift at the restaurant. Both were surprised to see Matt. Felicity looked at her watch.

'You're home a bit early aren't you? You usually get off at four thirty. Did they eat less today?'

Sandy too was looking at him with an expression of expectancy.

'Well, they finally cottoned on to my wayward eating of the forbidden fruits habit.'

Both of them laughed. Sandy put down his book.

'What was it that pushed you over the edge? Let me guess. A lovely roasted chicken breast? Freshly sliced shoulder ham?'

'No, I was done in by a humble, but, I must say, very well cooked, lamb chop.'

His two friends laughed along with him.

'How long did you last, in the end?' asked Sandy.

'Well, nearly a full ten days. Probably more than any man should have to suffer.'

'You should have stayed a vegetarian.' admonished Felicity, jokingly.

'Oddly enough, I still sort of feel that I am, at least 90% anyway. It was just the smell of all that lovely food which I would have to extract from the oven, and throw out. All on a bloody empty stomach as well. Just how much did they expect from me? I am but mortal man.'

Sandy, also, had a jab for his mate.

'I've never even seen you eat a lamb chop. Maybe we should add them to the Mulligory stew?'

Matt took his admonition in good humour.

'OK, OK. I've got the idea.'

Sandy had some interesting news of his own to add.

'Actually I was just on the point of seriously looking for a job as well.'

That brought the house down. Matt couldn't stop laughing.

'Yeah, I guess you needed a bit of time to get yourself into the right frame of mind, eh?'

'Well, these things can't be rushed, you know. Otherwise you might find yourself in a bitter battle to the death with a lamb chop.'

The first to realise what Matt's news could implicate was Felicity.

'Where does this all leave you?' she asked, with somewhat of a disquieted tone of voice.

Matt looked at her tenderly.

'Well, I was asking myself that on the walk home. I guess it means that moving out day has arrived, a bit earlier than expected. While I have this small influx of money, we should probably hit the road. I have less than I was hoping for, but it should be enough to get me up to Nelson.'

Sandy sat up at the news.

'Let the adventure begin. Well, continue, I mean.'

Sandy looked slightly guiltily at Felicity. He could see that she was trying to put a brave face on it all.

'I'm going to really miss you guys. Plus, I have to head off to work now, so we can't even have a last dinner, or anything. Are you going to leave early in the morning?'

Matt walked over to her, and put his arms around her.

'No, I have to go and pick up my pay in the morning, plus without a doubt the road will be icy first thing, so I'm not going to risk sliding down the road. Why don't we all go and have breakfast out in the morning? We can head off towards lunchtime.'

Sandy understood the implications of what that last goodbye between the two of them would entail. Neither of them professed to wanting a serious relationship, but they were very close, nonetheless.

'Actually, in the morning I want to take some last photos down at the harbour, so I will pick up something in town, and will meet you back here around 11.

Sound good?'

Matt and Felicity didn't reply, still wrapped in a warm embrace.

Chapter Four: A Place of Welcome

Barely had the last houses of the outer suburbs of Dunedin fallen from view when Matt unexpectedly pulled the van over onto the hard shoulder of the road. Sandy looked over at him inquisitively.

'Do you want to go back to Dunedin already?'

Matt laughed, and nodded his head.

'Yeah, I just feel that I should give that dish-washing gig a better shot. I absolutely refuse to be beaten by a lamb chop.'

'Actually, I think you were beaten by it. Wiped out, brother. The 90% vegetarian was taken down hard.'

'Yeah, OK OK. Look here, let me show you why I stopped.'

Matt opened up the road map, and held it across so that they could both look at it. Matt pointed ahead along the road.

'You see that junction? Basically we can go two possible ways.'

He then drew his finger along the map.

'Either we head down, and then up across the Otago hinterland, or we can go up, and then circle back down. In any case both the roads end up at the town Alexandra, where the two of them join together, and become the only road across to the other side. The distance looks about the same to me. What do you think? Any preference?'

Sandy took the map to have a better look.

'I see what you mean. Hey, look! If we take the route south we will pass this lake. Might be a good spot for lunch.' his tone of voice then turned more than a little mischievous. 'Plus, you can have a swim. Maybe a longer, more relaxing one this time?'

Matt smiled at him.

'Very funny young man. A swim in the freezing water of a lake down here in the deep south might be pushing even my limits, but it definitely would be a good spot for lunch. Have no fear, I have stocked up on the Mulligory prerequisites.' Sandy's irony had no bounds.

'I should have tried to convince Felicity to come along.'

'I think you will find that at the end of the day, my friend, I can outcook her any time.'

They both broke out laughing at that one. Matt engaged second gear, and pulled the van back out onto the highway.

'Further south it is then. To be honest I had wanted to hit the road a bit earlier, but with everything, time has just slipped away a bit.'

Sandy looked at him slightly sardonically.

'Well, 'everything' I assume includes saying goodbye to Felicity? Something I hope you did adequately. Plus anyway, what's the hurry? Let's take a timeless journey across the Otago plains.'

'Don't be a smartass. You know what I mean, it gets dark early in this season, that's all. You should have come with us for breakfast. We found a really nice place.'

In reply Sandy looked over at him, and was on the point of saying something when he spotted a glimpse of water.

'There's the lake coming into view now. Looks good.'

'Yes, it bloody does look nice. Actually along the way we should bump into a few lakes, here and there.'

'The whole scenery is just incredible. The colours are so intense, they almost seem painted on, it's almost like... Hey, pull over there!'

Sandy pointed to a car park

'Well spotted, young man.'

Matt pulled into the car park of Lake Waihola. The rest area came complete with picnic tables and an incredible view of the lake, the farmlands beyond it, and the densely forested hills behind them.

'Well, nice one, Matt. What a beautiful lake! What a fantastic view. Look at how calm and serene the water looks.'

'Plenty more where this one came from, my friend. We will be passing some good ones up in the highlands in a few days. Grab the food box, get peeling and chopping, and I'll get a fire going. You know the ropes. The usual story.'

Without much time having been lost, the veggie stew was cooking away in the billy can. The two of them had their system down to a fine art, not that the process was particularly complicated. In short order Matt was spooning his fine cuisine onto their plates. Sandy availed himself of the piping hot fare.

'Actually, I have to admit, it's not too bad at all. I had almost missed it.'

'You see? You were ruined by all those bloody pies you were scoffing down on a daily basis. It's time for the two of us to rediscover our vegetarian roots.'

'Yeah, and no lamb chops.'

Matt roared with laughter.

'Man, can you believe that? Sacked over a bloody lamb chop.'

'Well, you and your lamb chops, me and my meat pies, and here we are eating veggie stew. And loving it. I'm sure there's a lesson to be learnt in there somewhere.'

'When you work out that conundrum make sure you let me know. I'm sure it will be life changing.'

After they finished their banquet, Matt collected all the dirty plates, and whatnot, and headed down to the lakeside to wash them. In the middle of the process he called back to Sandy, who was still sitting at the table, seemingly mesmerised by the beauty of the spot.

'Hey, you wouldn't believe how cold the water is Sandy.'

That made Sandy laugh.

'No, actually I would.'

With Matt trying to pick up the pace, in no time at all they were back on the road. Barely ten kilometres further down the road they came to a junction. Matt turned right.

'Well, that's the end of State Highway 1 for us. We are officially heading up into the Otago back country. The journey across this rugged island officially begins now.'

'I guess the road is going to be all uphill from now, then?'

'Yeah,' replied Matt, 'although at first it's a pretty gentle rise. The steep stuff comes later on.'

'Are we sure the van will make it over, in just second gear?'

'Hey, no one said this a trip for the faint-hearted. Have faith, my son, all will be fine.'

'That sounds like the sort of thing people say just before a complete disaster strikes.'

'Hey, chill out, man. Sit back, and enjoy the view. Hey, look, there are some sheep!'

Sandy threw back his head and laughed.

'Yeah, not many of them around in New Zealand.'

'Actually we are lucky that they aren't aggressive animals. They outnumber us by about 30 to 1. Hopefully there isn't a secret movement in the sheep community to take over the country.'

'From what I can see, they already have. They are absolutely everywhere. I have to say, though, it really is nice around here. Hilly, but not too much so. Beautiful rolling green hills. I've never seen such an intense shade of green before. I really like it through here.'

The two fell into a contented silence, as the kilometres passed. It was

slow going in the van, following the rise and fall of the never flat road. By the time a couple of hours had passed the light was already starting to fade.

'It's going to be cold sleeping in the van up here, Matt. Don't you think?'

'Yeah, with just one and a half millimetres of British steel between us and minus God-only-knows how much. We'll have to get bundled up.'

Sandy pointed ahead along the road, excitedly.

'Slow down! Look at that house. It's obviously deserted. What about having a look inside?'

Matt pulled the van over, in front of the house. He looked carefully at the house.

'Yeah, it really does look abandoned. Why don't we knock on the door. If anyone answers we'll just pretend we are looking for directions, or something.'

The two jumped out of the van, and walked up to the front door. After first knocking with no reply, they decided to try the door handle. It was open.

Cautiously they entered the house to find it empty. It was completely bare of furniture. It was, as had been suspected, abandoned.

'Sandy, I think we may have scored somewhere a bit warmer for the night. Or maybe, somewhere a bit less cold would be a more appropriate way to put it.'

'Hey Matt, look in this room. Is this weird, or what?'

Matt followed the sound of Sandy's voice into what looked like the former dinning room. In the middle of the room there was a single wooden chair. Sandy sat on it.

'The whole place is absolutely devoid of everything, except for this one chair. How strange is that?'

'I guess the removal truck just didn't have enough room for that last piece, what do I know? Actually, what do I care? Come on, lets get our sleeping bags in before the light fades totally.'

In the fading light of day's end, they returned to the van to get all that which was necessary for a good night's sleep. The house was empty, and unheated, but it afforded more protection from the bitter cold than the van would have. They laid out their sleeping bags on the stark wooden floor.

'Shit, Matt, I forgot to bring my alarm clock. How will we know what time is breakie time?'

The two of them shared a chuckle.

'Look to the sun, my friend. The only clock we'll be needing.'

'I think tonight I'll be dreaming of the sun back home.'

'However much it aggrieves me, I'll pass on the easy opening you left me to poke fun at the soft Aussie, but only because, to be completely honest, I wouldn't mind a bit of that sun myself.'

Sandy put his hands behind his head.

'Felicity is really getting somewhere, don't you think?'

'She's always been like that. She's fun-loving, and adventurous, but she has always had an eye on her future for as long as I've known her.'

'I wonder if I should be a bit more like that?'

'You? You, my friend will be an eternal bodger.'

Sandy laughed.

'So you don't have any faith in me, then?'

'Actually I meant it in the best of ways. You just take life as it comes, and enjoy whatever is on your plate at the moment. Not a bad way to live. We are all different. Each of us has to find his way. Eventually the right course will just pop up before you, and you will find your path. Your way of life is to live an eternal present.'

'Hah! An eternal present? I like that. I'm warming to the idea.'

Matt shivered loudly.

'This sleeping bag is crap. I don't know how I let you talk me into this trip.'

The last sound which reverberated around the empty house was that of their combined laughter.

The next morning was cold, bitterly cold. Matt, with his unzipped sleeping bag wrapped around his shivering body, surveyed the surrounding area from the vantage point of the front door. He liked what he saw. The thick vegetation all around the house, and along the side of the road was of an intense green, highlighted by the dew that had formed on it during the cold of night. Spider webs sparkled as the early morning sun reflected off the dampness that had formed on them. Behind him he heard the sound of approaching footsteps reverberating through the empty house. He turned to look at Sandy.

'You know, this is a really nice spot. I didn't really get a good look at it last evening. I suppose because it was getting late, and I was pretty intent on finding a spot to sleep the night. I wonder why you would abandon such a nice house in such a lovely spot? I would love to live here.'

Sandy shrugged.

'Lots of reasons. The kids had gone off to varsity in Dunedin, and the parents wanted to be closer to them. Maybe one of the owners died and the remaining partner didn't want to live out here alone, or perhaps...'

Matt interrupted him gruffly.

'OK, OK, I get it. Lots of reasons, right? Man, you are a real downer this morning. What's up? Need a coffee?'

Sandy shrugged his shoulders.

'Well, I wouldn't mind.'

'Good luck on that one. Anyway, we do have some tea with us. Listen, let's pack up the whole circus, and head off down the road a bit. We'll find somewhere to brew up a billy of tea, and eat some biscuits. What do you say?'

'Yeah, OK. Sounds good to me. Let's do it.'

The two of them returned inside, put on their boots and jackets, rolled up their sleeping bags, and headed out to the van. Matt was loading up his gear when he saw Sandy at the doorway, complete with the only object they had found in the house gripped tightly in his hands. He laughed at the sight.

'So, what's this? Are we liberating the chair from its life of loneliness, and desolation?'

'The way it was just sitting there in the middle of the room. I don't know. It was pleading with me. It was a sign.'

They both laughed in unison.

'Plus, you like the idea of having breakfast sitting up all prim and proper, right?'

In reply Sandy gave him the finger, and said;

'Remember, my chair.'

'OK, throw it in.'

With the van all packed up, they drove further along the road, looking for a suitable place to stop, and get their breakfast tea brewing. In short order such a place was found, and Matt pulled off the road into what could be described as a modest parking bay. With the great alacrity learnt from previous experience, it wasn't long until the two of them were sipping on piping hot cups of tea, and chewing on some cereal biscuits. Matt was sitting on a flat rock, with Sandy towering over him, sitting on his newly liberated throne. Matt threw some small stones in his direction.

'You're loving your new bloody chair, I see. I feel like we have now become divided along socio-economic lines. The landed gentry with their wealth and prestige, and the rest of us poor buggers with nothing to sit on but rocks.'

Sandy crossed his legs, and looked at Matt pensively.

'Well, it was inevitable, poor fellow. I'm surprised it took you so long to figure it all out.'

Matt threw some more small stones in his direction.

'You even have your own personal driver. Do you require me to wear a chauffeurs hat?'

Sandy struck a thoughtful demeanour, as he thought of his answer.

'Well, it obviously would be more fitting, but, all in all, I really am quite a benevolent person, so I won't demand it. On the other hand, if you feel that it

would be more decorous, I certainly wouldn't deny you your place.'

'My lord and master.'

Sandy's tone of voice turned slightly serious, as much as seriousness was a possibility between the two of them.

'Hey, you know, that house was a godsend. It would have been bloody freezing in the van. The higher up we get, the colder the nights will be getting. What say we look for places to sleep, just while we are crossing the Otago hinterland?'

Matt nodded.

'Yeah, I agree. My sleeping bag wasn't made for these arctic conditions. I must admit I never realised just how much colder it is down here than Christchurch. And to be honest, that place was cold enough.'

'Any chance of pies for lunch. Hey, don't get me wrong, but...'

Matt laughed along with Sandy.

'Mulligory breakdown? Is your pie addiction kicking in? Actually we should hit Alexandra in a couple of hours. We can have a look around, and grab lunch there. That's where we turn off for the West Coast.'

Sandy stood up, poured the remaining water in the billy on the already spent twigs, and gathered together the cups to wash.

'Come on then, Jeeves. Lets get this lot sorted, and hit the road.'

The road snaked through bush-clad valleys, surrounded by mainly modest sized hills. Although they were climbing ever higher above sea level, the change was gradual, and the road was fairly easy going on the van. Luckily really, because the van wasn't in a fit state for any particularly steep inclines. In some areas the land flattened out, exposing good farmland which was always put to good use. There were a lot of sheep farms which mainly made use of the more difficult terrain, but the flat, more accessible land was seemingly mainly used for growing different fruit crops. Peaches and apricots seemed to dominate that market. The landscape was variable, and always extremely beautiful. At some points the road ran parallel to a river, but mainly they passed through a combination of slight hills, and brief flatlands. Within a few hours they arrived at the junction town of Alexandra. As they approached the town Matt slowed down.

'That was actually a pretty good run for the van.' said Matt. 'I don't want the bugger to heat up too much. So I think we should give it a couple of hours of rest. Anyway, by the time we have something to eat, and a bit of a look around it should be right.'

Sandy nodded in agreement.

'The old dear's going really well. Soooo....., pies anyone?'

They both laughed.

'What's the story? One day we are vegetarians, the next day meat eaters?'

'A balanced diet, dear fellow. What could be better?'

The laughter continued unabated.

'True, all things in moderation.' replied Matt. 'OK, let's look for a bakery.'

'There, look, on the left. Some sort of tearooms. Should be OK, I reckon.'

Matt slowed down further, half way along the main street of the town. In the sparsely populated centre Matt easily found a few free parking spots, so he managed to pull in without requiring the services of his official pusher.

Something which was of no little relief to the aforementioned incumbent. The two of them jumped out of the van and stretched their arms.

'You know it's funny,' said Sandy, 'it almost seems warm after the rigid temperature last night, even though it's probably not even in double digits.'

'Yeah, nice sunshine alright. Just the sight of it always warms me up.

Psychological warming.'

'You are definitely an odd one, you know that, don't you Matt?'

Matt's only answer was to completely ignore the hypothesis, and to stay focused on the matter in hand. Hunger had set in.

'Hey, this place does look good. Just the ticket.'

The boys entered into the tearooms, and surveyed the options. Luckily pies were never far from the menu in any decent tearoom establishment. They filled their trays from the self-service heating displays, and headed to the checkout.

'Do you have filter coffee?' asked Sandy.

The young girl behind the counter almost smirked in delight at the oft-asked question regularly invoked by out of towners.

'Just instant coffee, sorry.'

'OK, well I'll have a cup of tea then.'

'Make that tea for two, please.' added Matt.

The two friends paid for their fare, and then made their way over to one of the many empty tables with their food. Business was not flourishing. Mind you, only fools like them would be travelling through such cold lands in the off season. Shortly the young girl brought their teas over.

'Here you go.'

Matt smiled at her, and took the opportunity to get some local information from her.

'Thanks, hey what's there to check out in town?'

'Well, mainly everyone stops at the gold mining museum. It's just along the road, then turn left. You can't miss it.'

'Nice one. Thank you.'

The girl smiled, and returned to her counter.

Sandy's interest was piqued.

'Gold mining? Yeah?'

'Yup, it was big in the late 1800s down here. A real gold rush. They came from everywhere. Actually I think some people still try their luck. Just on a small scale though. There are no big mining operations around. Shall we give it a go? Some gold to put in the petrol tank?'

'I'll get back to you on that one. I'm pretty sure it would involve wading around in incredibly cold rivers, and other rather inconvenient practices. I really would like to check out the museum, though.'

'Yeah, sounds good. Man, you are eating that pie like they are going out of business. Take it easy. What's wrong with you?'

Sandy laughed, almost spluttering out some of the food in his mouth. He tried to regain his composure.

'I love these things. Plus, I know what I have to look forward to tomorrow, so I'm making the most of it.'

'Variety, right? A balanced diet. Your words, if I remember correctly.'

'I may have spoken in undue haste.'

'Well, believe me, you are stuffing that pie into your gob in undue haste.'

'Get them while they are hot, dear fellow.'

Matt shook his head in mimicked disgust.

'Come on, hurry up and finish your tea, ya bugger, and let's have a look at that museum. It'll give the van a bit of a chance to cool down as well.'

After having easily found the museum in the small town, the two lads spent an hour, or so, looking at all the exhibits, mainly photos, of the gold rush days. The gold diggers looked like tough men, doing a tough job. The more they looked at the reality of gold digging, the less enthusiastic they became about trying their luck.

'Suddenly washing dishes in a hospital doesn't seem that bad.' Matt said, rather philosophically.

'Amen to that.' replied Sandy. 'That is not a lifestyle for me. Talk about back-breaking work. My God. I think they should have just signed up on the dole.'

Both of them laughed heartily.

'Yes, I think we might have been born at just the right time in history, Sandy. Mind you, I must say they all look pretty happy with their lot.'

'Obviously, you idiot. The photographer always says 'say cheese!'. Probably, in reality, their spirits were as broken as their backs.'

'I don't know what went wrong in your life when you were a toddler, but you are a pretty cynical prick, you know?'

'So I've been told.'

Matt shook his head.

'One day we are going to have to explore that deeper. But only when we have a lot of time, and an endless supply of alcohol.'

Matt then looked at a clock on the wall.

'Come on, let's get out of here. It'll be dark in a couple of hours. We need to find somewhere warm to kip.'

'For sure. Another house like last night would go down well.'

They walked back along the almost deserted streets, and got into the van. Matt fired up the faithful beast, and pulled out onto the road. Their first brief stop was to fill up the ever insatiable petrol tank of their faithful war-horse. Then he set off to find the junction.

'Well, my friend, this is where we actually get onto the road that heads across to the West Coast. We have passed the point of no return.'

'Lead on Macduff, and I will follow you. Hey, pass me the map. How far across are we now?'

Matt grabbed the map from the dashboard, and threw it across to his companion. Sandy looked intently at how far they had travelled.

'Looks like we are just about half way across, you know.'

'Yeah, but the part ahead of us is more mountainous, rather than just hilly. It's gonna take a while.'

'Including the famous Haast Pass. Yeah, you schmuck, I'm onto your little game. Rugby terminology, right?'

They both laughed.

'Listen Sandy, failure is not an option. We're going over the bugger, come hell or high water.'

'I am a man of great faith, albeit of little fortitude.'

Matt glanced at Sandy, and replied mockingly:

'I can certainly vouch for that.'

The going was still relatively easy, even though it was always in generally an upwards direction. There were no flat patches at all, just a mixture of higher, and smaller hills. The landscape was, as ever, nothing short of spectacular. Where there were fields, they were of the most intense green, and the bush covered hills with their mixtures of different types of native trees just served to give them a grandiose backdrop.

'Hey, slow down, man!' yelled Sandy. 'Look down there. Does that look like an

abandoned house to you?'

Matt stopped the van in the middle of the road, and looked down where Sandy was pointing.

'Not a house, but it may be some abandoned farm sheds, or something. There's the entrance road up ahead. It's definitely worth a look. It will be dark in an hour or so, better to check out places while there's still some light.'

Matt engaged second gear, and headed further along the highway to where a dirt road lead down to the buildings. The road down to them was rutted, and in the wet would have been all but impassible for anything less than a four wheel drive. Upon reaching the buildings Matt did a wide sweeping turn on the surrounding grass, bringing the van back to face in the opposite direction. After bringing the van to a halt he had a better look at the place.

'Actually Sandy, there's lots of machinery and stuff around. It looks like part of a working farm. Probably not a good option.'

The words were barely out of his mouth when the two of them saw a four wheel drive pickup truck coming down the entrance road towards them.

'Fuck it, what a bummer. This is bound to be the owner of the farm. Listen Sandy, let's just go with the looking-for-a-place-to-crash story. We haven't even got out of the van yet, so it should all be an easy sell.'

Now what the boys didn't know, but would soon find out to their great misfortune, was that thieves had broken into the farm buildings some months prior to their arrival, and ever since the farmer had been keeping a vigilant eye on the place from his house, further up the road. He stopped his truck, and jumped out, with a wildly angry expression on his tough-looking wizened face. He began waving his arms around and shouting.

'Bloody thieves. Thought you could get one over me a second time, did ya?

Well, I've got another think coming for you.'

Matt wound down his window, and tried to appear as friendly, and innocuous as possible.

'Hi there. Actually we're just looking for somewhere to sleep the night. It's pretty cold sleeping in the van up here in Central Otago.'

'Don't give me any of that bullshit, ya prick. I've got ya now! Big mistake coming back for another go.' yelled the enraged farmer. His face red with anger. His nostrils flaring.

He opened the driver's door, and tried to pull Matt out of the van by grabbing onto his arm and pulling. When he realised that the seatbelt was blocking Matt in, he drew a knife from his pocket, unfolded it, and proceeded to cut away the seatbelt.

'Hey, take it easy! We're not thieves! Here, look, I'll undo the seat belt.'

Matt undid the seatbelt, but at the same time pushed his legs down onto the floor of the van, and pushed his back hard against the back of the seat. The farmer kept pulling at his arm, but, even without the seatbelt holding him in place, still couldn't dislodge him from the van. The knife was still in his hand, and was held very close to Matt's face. Sandy, having also realised the seriousness of the situation, tried to placate the farmer.

'We're only looking for somewhere to sleep, we don't have any intention of stealing anything. In fact, as soon as we saw that it wasn't an abandoned building we decided to leave. We didn't even get out of the van.'

'Yeah, well that's because I didn't give you time to, did I? Ya bloody mongrels, I'll sort you lot out.'

Matt continued the plea deal.

'Hey, look at our stuff in the back of the van. Does it look like we are thieves? We've just got our mattresses, and clothes and stuff. We are only travelling through, on the cheap. We've never been here before, I promise.'

The irate farmer looked with keen interest in the back of the van. He kept a tight grip on Matt's arm but stopped pulling at him.

'OK then, where did you get that green rucksack?'

Sandy jumped in.

'That's mine. My mother bought it for me a few years ago, when I went on a trip up north from Sydney.'

'What about that red backpack, there?'

'That's mine.' replied Matt keeping the steady stream of reassuring chatter going. 'My mate Pete gave it to me up in Auckland. He's had a kid, so he can't hit the road any more, and it's no use to him any more.'

'And those bloody sleeping bags? Where did you nick them?'

Sandy's turn.

'No, man. They're ours. Usually we sleep in the van, see the mattresses? But up here it gets bloody cold at night, that's all.'

'And what the hell's in that box? Nicked stuff, I'll bet.'

Matt to the rescue.

'Of course not. It's full of vegetables. We don't have a lot of money, so we cook up a veggie stew quite often for lunch, or dinner.'

The boys were keeping up a steady reassuring banter, and were sure that things were going in the right direction, until...

'And what about that bloody chair?'

Silence

Total silence.

'Gotcha! Ya bloody thieves!'

Matt quickly realised their mistake, and immediately sprang back into action.

'That old bloody chair? Look at it. It's a piece of goddamn junk. We stayed with a friend of mine in Dunedin, and she was gonna throw it out, so we thought we may as well bring it along. Who the hell would steal a rattly old chair like that? Hey, man, look carefully at our stuff. We're just a couple of mates travelling around the South Island on the bones of our arses.'

The farmer closely scrutinised everything in the van again, and, maybe not necessarily believing them, but by the same token not totally convinced of their guilt either, relented his grip on Matt's arm. The intensity of his anger slowly abated.

'Get the bloody hell out of here before I change my mind.'

Barely were the words out of his mouth when Matt had fired up the van, and, without even shutting the door, drove off back towards the road, closing the door along the way. Not a word was spoken until they were safely back on the highway, and flying away from the disastrous events.

'Listen Sandy, I don't care how fucking cold it gets, we are sleeping in the van from here on in. Fuck that shit!'

'Don't worry, man. I am with you all the way. I don't want anything like that to happen again either. Fucking hell, It must have been scary having that knife waved in your face so much.'

'I can't believe we got out of there in one piece. That guy was pissed! Who fucking knew he had been hit by thieves recently?'

'Well, one thing I can tell you, Matt. First pub we come to, that's us. I need a bloody drink!'

'Yeah, me too brother, and quite possibly more than one.'

'Hey, somehow we survived. That's got to be worth celebrating.'

The two of them fell into a somewhat uneasy silence. They both realised that things could have gone far worse than they had back at that farm.

Luckily, considering the sullen mood they had fallen into, it didn't take long until an isolated country pub came into view. Without a word needing to be spoken, Matt drove into the car park, and widely arched the van around, ready for when they would leave. He had become somewhat of an artist at driving with no reverse gear. The preparations for their eventual departure had become second nature to him. The two lads, still slightly shaken, made their way into the relatively quiet bar, and ordered a couple of beers on tap. They easily found a free table, and sat down.

'My God! Can you believe this, Matt? Here we are sitting in a bar as if nothing had happened. That whole gig could have been really serious. Even if he had just blocked the van, and called the cops. Without even thinking about what he could have done with that fucking knife. I would say we really should be thankful for small miracles.'

Matt raised his glass, and nodded in agreement.

'I'll drink to that, brother. Cheers!'

Their first drink didn't take long to go down, and neither did the second one. It wasn't until they were quietly supping on their third beers that they really started to relax. It was all behind them. Just a good story to add to those that they had already accumulated on their trip.

'Sandy, who the hell is putting on all this shit Country music? Man, it's wicked.' They were both surprised by a voice from behind them.

'Actually, it's me.'

They both turned around, and saw a woman sitting, alone, at the table behind them. She was a lot older than them, probably in her mid to late thirties. The two of them were in their early twenties. She was relatively good looking with long dark hair, but had a certain kind of hardness about her appearance. She was obviously a person who had either worked hard, or played hard. Or perhaps a combination of both. Matt quickly jumped onto the defensive.

'I'm sorry about that. It's just not my kind of music. I didn't mean to offend anyone.'

The woman laughed at their obvious embarrassment.

'Don't be silly. I didn't take any offence. Everyone has their own taste in music. I know that, don't worry. I haven't seen you two in here before. Have you just got into the area? Are you working around here?'

'No, we are just passing through, on a bit of a trip around.' said a rather relieved Matt.

He had had enough problems for one day.

'What about you? Do you live around here?'

'No, I'm just here for the season. Actually we are in-between seasons at the moment. I work on a sheep farm, so we are just preparing everything for when the next shearing season takes off. That won't be for a while yet, so It's all pretty quiet. Anyone for another beer?'

Matt jumped to his feet, sensing a good way to redeem himself after his awkward music comment.

'These ones are on me.'

He shot off to the bar, and ordered another round. By the time he got back to the

table their new found friend had already made herself at home with them at their table.

'Matt, this is Sue. Sue, Matt.'

'Hi there Matt.'

'Nice to meet you.'

'So where are you boys staying? There aren't any hotels, or even camping grounds around here. There's nothing for miles.'

Sandy and Matt both burst out laughing.

'We are sleeping in our van.' said Sandy, still laughing.

'Are you laughing about that because it's very cold, or what?' asked a slightly confused Sue.

'It definitely is really cold in the van.' explained Matt. 'But, actually we were laughing because we just had a bit of a run in with an irate farmer who thought we were thieves, when we were only looking for an abandoned place to crash in.'

Sue had some good news for them.

'Well, this is your lucky day then. On the farm we have a lot of bunk rooms for the shearers in the high season. They are all empty now, so your problems are solved.'

Sandy and Matt exchanged glances. Neither of them wanted a repeat performance of the late afternoon's activities. Sandy put those preoccupations into words.

'Listen, that's very kind of you, but we don't want to cause any more problems. We're just gonna sleep in the van tonight. Cold or not.'

'Are you nuts? What are ya talking about? I've been doing seasons out on Ted's farm for years. We've become bloody good mates. He won't mind at all. In fact, in the morning I will cook you both up one helluva breakfast.'

The two friends were still rather resistant, but with the soothing effect of the beer, and Sue's pretty convincing demeanour, they were starting to come around. Matt decided to make one last-ditch attempt to confirm the validity of the offer.

'Sue, are you absolutely sure about this? We really have had enough aggro for one day. We really don't want to risk having any more.'

Sue scoffed loudly.

'Don't be a couple of bloody idiots. Come on, let's have another round, and we'll head off.'

Sandy relented. The booze had relaxed him, and Sue definitely seemed sure about it all.

'Yeah, OK, good one. Let's do it. This round's on me.'

As Sandy went up to the bar for another round, Matt also decided that after the incredibly bad luck they had encountered merely a few hours prior it was time to put such negative thoughts aside, and look forward to a bit of a happy ending to the day. After all, how much worse could one day get? Sandy returned from the bar, and placed the beers on the table.

'Here you go.'

Sandy then raised his glass.

'Cheers to the two of you. Here's to new friendships, and warm beds.'

Matt almost spilt his beer laughing.

'How soon they forget!'

After the last round was satisfactorily consumed, the three of them found themselves thereafter in the van, with Matt light-heartedly driving towards the farm where Sue worked.

'Straight on for another kilometre, then take the first road on your left. Ted's place is the first entrance on your right.'

After barely ten minutes they arrived at the farm. Matt turned the van into the entranceway.

'The bunk house is over there.'

Sue pointed to the left. Matt, however, drove across to the right, then made his usual wide swerve to end up parking in front of the house, facing the direction to leave.

'Come on, first I'll show you where everything is, then you can grab your stuff from the van.'

Sue headed into the unlocked house, with the two boys in tow. She went into a room on the right of the corridor.

'This is a pretty good room, no bunks here, just single beds. The bathroom is that door over there. In the morning I'll send someone over to call you when breakfast is ready. Have a good sleep, I'm off to bed. See you guys in the morning.'

Without further ado, Sue left them to it.

'Man, does this look good.' said Sandy grinning. 'Let's just get our sleeping bags and hit the sack. I'm too tired to hit the bathroom.'

'Yeah, me too. I'm buggered. We'll get cleaned up in the morning.'

They both went out to the van to get their sleeping bags. Strangely neither of them had wondered how Sue had been intending to return to the farm, if they hadn't come along. Or, how she had actually got to the pub in the first place, with no car? Sometimes small details like those can actually make a lot of

difference. Ignorance indeed can be bliss, but it can also be perilous. In point of fact, unbeknown to the two of them, she had been at the pub with her companion, another hard-bitten seasonal farm worker. In reality, in the hard-bitten stakes he made Sue look like a bit of a novice. As was not unusual for the couple, after a few drinks the same old arguments had bubbled to the surface, helped along the way by the steady flow of alcohol, and when he had had enough of those arguments, Sue's companion had stormed off, leaving her stranded at the pub. Stranded, that was, until Matt and Sandy had turned up, unaware of the Shakespearean drama they had inadvertently become part of. On the one hand Sue had needed a lift home, but also, just to let her boyfriend realise that she was still able to turn a few heads, it didn't hurt that she had found herself in the company of a couple of good looking young fellows. All in all, there was quite a lot going on in the background about which the two friends were completely oblivious. They would soon play catch up fast. 'This one looks good to me.' said Sandy, as he rolled out his sleeping bag on one of the beds.

Matt yawned.

'I can't even be bothered testing which bed has the hardest mattress, I'm just gonna go with this one. One way or another it's gonna be better than the one in the van.'

Matt threw his sleeping bag on the chosen bed, and started to unroll it. Suddenly a loud crash was heard, a noise which seemed to be something akin to the front door of the house being kicked open. The two startled friends looked towards the bedroom door just in time to see a savage image of extreme anger aiming a rifle at them. They stopped dead in their tracks.

'So, come on, which one of you bastards wants to sleep with my woman? Come on you fucking pricks, out with it, or I'll shoot ya both!'

The shock of it all was almost beyond comprehension for Matt and Sandy. The man, if you could call him that, pointing the rifle at them had a look of wild fire in his eyes, something bordering on psychotic hatred. His scruffy black bushman's beard, and long straggly hair did nothing but reinforce the realisation of the very real danger they found themselves in. What they saw in front of them was a person who looked so unhinged it was doubtful that he had ever possessed any semblance of normality. For a few split seconds they were both speechless, just trying to work out what the hell had just happened. The crazed man walked even closer to them, pointing the weapon at each of them in turn. The sheer hatred in his voice was palpable.

'Nobody fucks my woman, ya hear me! Ya fucking bastards! No one leaves here

until I've got the truth out of ya. Ya understand me?'

Waking up to the extremely dangerous situation they had somehow found themselves in, the two friends jumped into damage control mode, in a similar mode to that which they had used with the irate farmer and his knife, earlier in the day.

'We were just looking for a place to sleep the night.' said Matt.

'Neither of us have anything but the best of intentions towards Sue. She kindly offered us a place here to sleep, which we gratefully accepted.' Sandy.

'Of course, now that we realise that we aren't welcome here we will most certainly leave.' Matt.

'Under no circumstances did we mean to upset anyone or come between you and Sue.' Sandy.

'I'll fucking kill the both of ya, ya cunts!'

His face was contorted with rage. His finger was on the trigger.

'Listen, we don't mean any harm to anyone, we'll get out of your way immediately.' said Matt as he grabbed his sleeping bag, and made a few tentative steps towards the door.

Sandy, seeing Matt's strategy, followed suit. He too, slowly grabbed his sleeping bag, and cautiously inched his way towards the door, talking as he went.

'Hey, we'll get out of your hair, and just hit the road. We'll just sleep in the van. We didn't mean to cause any problems.'

By that stage the two of them were actually going through the bedroom door, walking backwards, with the wild man following them, still pointing his rifle at them.

'No one fucks with me and my woman, no one!'

The boys, still walking backwards, slowly moved towards the van, which, fortunately, was parked just outside the main door.

'Hey, we are off, man. We don't want to upset anyone, or to cause any trouble.' said Matt as he opened the door of the van, threw his sleeping bag into the back, and slowly climbed into the drivers seat.

'I'd just like to say how sorry I am for all this misunderstanding.' said Sandy, as he followed Matt's lead, and cautiously got into the van.

'I'll kill any bastard who even touches my woman, ya hear me?'

Never had either of them seen such anger, or such delirium. They both wanted desperately to get as far away as possible as fast as possible. Matt turned on the engine, and slowly started to drive out of the property. He drove slowly because he didn't want to make it seem like they were escaping, so as not to further antagonise the madman. It took what seemed like an eternity to even reach the

entranceway of the farm. Matt glanced in his rear view mirror.

'Do you think a bullet could reach us here?'

'Just keep driving! How the fuck would I know?' Sandy replied, with his head down scrutinising the wing mirror.

In short order they had reached the main highway, and Matt blasted around the corner, and put his foot down.

'Hey, keep an eye out for headlights following us, man!'

'Yeah, don't worry, I am on it. You just drive as fast as you can, as far as you can.'

For the next ten minutes, or so, they continued like that, Matt racing along the road, with Sandy keeping his eyes glued to the wing mirror. It was only then that they felt like they could start to breathe again.

'It looks like we are safe.' said Sandy, cautiously.

'Yeah, I...' Matt burst out laughing.

In his fit of laughter he almost lost control of the van, which was still going at high speed.

Sandy reached over and grabbed the steering wheel.

'What the fucking hell is so funny? Can you watch where you're going. What the fuck are you up to?'

Matt regained his composure, and slowed down the van a bit.

'I was just wondering if we are about to be hit by a stray lightning strike.'

Sandy burst out laughing as well. Probably their combined laughter was a sort of release mechanism for all the tension that had accumulated inside them.

'Absolutely nothing would surprise me, after what we've been through today. Anything is possible.'

'Hey Sandy, I know it's late, and we're both fucking tired, but I think I would like to clock up a lot of kilometres between us and that crazy bastard. You know, just in case.'

'I'm with you there, brother. Keep on driving, and don't spare the horses. I'll keep my eyes on the rear-view mirror, to make sure we're not being followed. Maybe you should slow it down a bit, though, just in case you have any more crazy thoughts about random lightning bolts, or suchlike. I don't want to escape being shot, just to end up dying in a fucking ditch.'

Chapter Five: The Great Ascent

The sunlight streaming in through the uncurtained windows of the van almost blinded Sandy, as, in a blur, he opened his eyes to the new day. Through his foggy mental haze one certainty was unavoidable. He could hear loud snoring coming from further back in the van. So as not to disturb the apparent deep slumber of his friend he did his best to make as little noise as possible. He slowly, and quietly, eased open the side door of the van, unavoidably letting in a blast of very cold air. He grabbed his boots and jacket, and slipped out of the van to get dressed. As quietly as possible, he closed the sliding door. He vaguely remembered from late the evening before that they had stopped by a lake, although with the combined effects of the alcohol he had imbibed, and his great state of tiredness, he hadn't really seen any more than reflections of the moonlight across the water. From the parking bay they had stopped in he couldn't see any water. However, there was a slight grassy rise just about ten metres from the van. He walked across the grass, and up the slope. Opening up before him he found the most magnificent, magical sight he had ever seen. It was nothing less than an explosion of delight. The early morning sun glistened on the still deep blue water of the lake. On the other side of the lake formidable snow-topped mountains burst towards the sky, in a grandiose show of strength and dignity. A slight haze lay in the air in patches, giving the whole scene an almost surreal feel. Sandy was in awe of the sight. He wanted to take it all in slowly, and peacefully. He wanted to be overwhelmed by its greatness and grandeur. He ran back down to the van, and grabbed the wooden chair he had recently liberated, which had been left outside the van the evening before to create more sleeping space. He carried the chair up the grassy rise, and placed it in a prime position, right on the crest. As he sat on the chair for a moment he shut his eyes, and slowly breathed in the crisp fresh air. He could think of nowhere better he would like to be in that exact moment. Opening his eyes, he almost couldn't believe the outstanding beauty that lay before him. He would take no photos of it. A photo would never be able to give justice to the sheer majesty of the view, or give understanding of the emotions he felt in that moment, as he looked at it. He would take mental photos, photos he would

cherish forever, along with the memories of the sensations overwhelming him while experiencing it all. That moment in time would always live within him.

'Wow, what a stunning place!'

Sandy was almost startled by his voice.

'Oh, morning Matt, I didn't hear you get out of the van.'

'Man, it's just so silent and peaceful. Bit cold, to be honest, but I think I can fix that. How about a nice brew up?'

'Sure.' replied Sandy, as he started to get to his feet.

Matt placed a hand on his shoulder.

'I got it sorted, man. You sit there on your throne in your regal bliss. The master of all things beautiful. How do you like New Zealand so far?' laughed Matt.

Sandy threw his arms into the air.

'I fucking love it!'

Matt started to head off for breakfast duties. Sandy turned, and called out to him.

'Hey Matt, what's this lake called?'

'I've got no idea. I'll have a look at the map.'

Sandy sat there transfixed by the beauty of the spot, while Matt got a small fire going for the billy. Sandy could hear various noises coming from behind him, but nothing could distract him from his main occupation. He was the King of the lake. He was surveying his dominion. His kingdom of exquisiteness.

'Here ya go, mate, get that into you.'

Matt handed Sandy a cup of boiling hot tea, in a tin mug. Out of his jacket pocket he drew a packet of cereal biscuits which he placed on the ground between them. Matt sat on the grass next to Sandy, and munched on a biscuit while he waited for his tea to cool down. Sandy also availed himself of a breakfast treat.

'So, it's called Lake Hawea. Incredibly, after this lake we pass directly onto another one. On the map it looks like they are only about a kilometre apart at the shortest point. And that is actually where the road goes, so it looks like we have a bloody good drive ahead of us. Better still, being a pretty isolated part of the country, I don't think we will be seeing any towns, so you will have the great privilege of feasting on the most wondrous of lunches.'

Sandy laughed as he took another biscuit from the packet.

'That will be the highlight of my day. Much better than looking at this boring old lake.'

'That's what I like to see, another satisfied customer.'

The two of them drank their tea, and ate their biscuits in silence. A silence thrust upon them by the sheer weight of the strength, and beauty, of the place they found themselves. Neither was in any hurry to leave the spot they had found purely by chance. Quite simply there had been a good spot to stop the van for the night. By reason of a mere logistical circumstance they had stumbled upon one of the most beautiful, and probably least known, places ever created. The day had started well. The indications for the day ahead of them were nothing but good, in sharp contrast to those of the previous day. Eventually the time arrived to discover just what that new day would bring.

'Come on then, Sandy, let's make a move.'

Matt grabbed the empty tea mugs, the remaining biscuits, and started to wander down to the van. Sandy, somewhat reluctantly, stood up and followed him. When they got to the van Matt looked back, and noticed something that Sandy had overlooked.

'Hey, mate, you forgot your chair.'

Sandy looked up at the chair, still sitting in its august position, overlooking the lake.

'No, it's time to really liberate that chair. I'm setting it free.'

Matt laughed as he got down to the job of washing the mugs, shaking his head.

'You really are a fucking idiot, you know that, right?'

Sandy was not to be deterred.

'God only knows how long it was sitting in that closed dark house for. Now, at least until someone else decides to give it a new home, it will have the pleasure of nobly looking out on great beauty and wonder.'

Matt was having none of it.

'The next person along will probably use it as firewood.'

'Matt, it's not about how long you live, it's about how well you live, in the time you have.'

Matt gave no answer, and just shook his head with great bemusement.

Back on the road they followed alongside the shore of the lake, except for the occasional stretch of road that went slightly inland, but they would always find themselves back lakeside within a matter of minutes at the most. Matt drove slowly, so the two of them could take in as much of the great beauty on offer as possible. After less than an hour the part of the lake they were following narrowed, and it was obvious that they would soon be leaving it behind. Then it disappeared completely from view.

'No, what a bummer. I can't believe we have left it.' said Sandy.

'Well, my friend, in about one minute yet another lake will open up before you.'

The words were barely out of his mouth when, indeed, another lake appeared before them. The road at that point was in a slightly elevated position, so they could see a great part of the lake laying before them. The foreshore was lower on their side of the lake, but quite mountainous on the other, with rugged snow-clad mountains forming the backdrop to the incredible picture of beauty before them.

'Shit, what a beautiful country, Matt.'

'You know the odd thing, they aren't really any towns or facilities around here. If you weren't self sufficient like us, you would have to just drive through, taking a few photos here and there, trying to find somewhere to eat and sleep. It's terrible really. The whole South Island is absolutely fantastic, but there is hardly anywhere to stop.'

'Yeah, point in fact where we spent the night. Just a small parking bay, but it actually lead us to find a spot of indescribable beauty. Maybe New Zealand needs more people?'

Matt shrugged his shoulders.

'But that doesn't work either, because everyone just ends up going to the big cities, because that's where the work is, the schools, and so on. These places end up just being occasional drive-by delights.'

By that time the road had found its way down to being right alongside the lake.

'Hey Matt, what do you think? We actually are self sufficient. What about spending the day looking around this lake, whatever it's called.'

Sandy grabbed the map from the dashboard.

'Lake Wanaka. What do you think?'

'With ya, man. We are in no hurry. After this we go over some mountains, and back to the coast, leaving all the inland lakes behind us.'

'Hey, pull in here! This looks like it heads down to the lake.'

Matt stopped the van, at the side of the road.

'Why are you stopping here?' asked Sandy, slightly surprised.

'Let's walk down first, and see if we are going to be able to turn the van around.'

Sandy nodded, and the two of them jumped out of the van, and walked along the short, dirt track, which then opened onto a large sort of car park, or, possibly, a camping area.

'Looks good, mate, I'm pretty sure I can spin it around. I'll try and end up over there, with a nice view of the lake from the van. A van with a view. You stay here, but make sure you stay out of my way. I won't be pissing around.'

Sandy laughed.

'No, you won't. From what I've seen so far I can vouch for that.'

Sandy found some rocks to stand on, while Matt headed back to the van. In a flash the van flew around the corner, spun in a wide arc, and stopped almost exactly where Matt had previously pointed to. Matt jumped out and joined his friend.

'Bloody nice view from here, man.'

'Yeah, but look back over there.'

Matt turned to look where Sandy was pointing.

'There's a sort of gully which snakes up along between those two rocky hills. After lunch I'm gonna take a walk up there.'

'Hey, I'm in on that too. First, though, I'm putting the billy on, man. I need another cuppa.'

Even though neither of them put it into words, they were both still slightly uneasy about the previous days events. Notwithstanding the fact that both of them were scrupulously avoiding the subject, it hung in the very air that surrounded them. It permeated their thoughts, and needed to be exorcised from their minds. Without a doubt the order of the day was to relax and unwind, in sharp contrast to the unsettling incidents of the previous day. Probably a day spent in tune with nature was exactly what they needed to get their minds back into a happy place, free of all negative thoughts.

'That's hit the spot, Matt. Nice one.'

'Yup, whatever the problem, a nice cup of tea is always the answer.'

Sandy laughed.

'Sometimes a quick getaway helps, as well.'

'Yeah, I've never seen the van move so fast. I kicked in the turbo boosters.'

Sandy looked pensively across the lake.

'And just look where we are now. What a difference from all that agro.'

'It's a new day, son. Time to stop dwelling on the past, and move forward.'

'The past? It was fucking yesterday.'

They both laughed. Sandy threw up his arms in a sign of surrender.

'A new day is indeed here. Fuck the past.'

'I can barely even remember it.'

After finishing off their brew, they both sought out activities to relax into. Things that would transport them to a mentally nice place, in tune with the scenically splendid place they found themselves in. Matt explored the lakeside, wandering where he would, and taking pleasure in just breathing in the pleasant clean air. He hesitantly dipped his fingers in the lake, on the off chance that a swim would be possible, but even he had to admit that hypothermia could be a real consequence. Sandy was in a mood for lazy. He found an old tree trunk to

sit against and he delved into one of his ever present books. Reading was one of his favourite ways of relaxing. A way of finding inner serenity. Both of them had thrown themselves into what could essentially be termed a form of meditation, a way to relax, and to be at one with the beauty of the place they found themselves in. As usual for that time of year they had the place all to themselves. They would have had it no other way. The companionship of nature at its quintessentially best was more than enough for them. However, after a while hunger pangs inevitably made their presence felt, and that could mean only one thing. A Mulligory cook up. It was time for lunch. With the practised ease of long habit, they made short work of the necessary preparations, and ingestion, of their customary lunch delight.

'Well, let's do it Matt. Are you in on having a look up the back there?'

Matt was just finishing off cleaning up the dishes. He stood and looked up and the hills behind them.

'Too right, mate.'

It was time to take that walk up into the hills behind the lake.

They walked across the road, and onto the rocks along the side of the small creek flowing down from the hills.

'We may as well just follow the gully up, Sandy. There's no track up here, so if we keep to the low lying ground the going should be easier.'

'I bet this little creek turns into a torrent after heavy rain.'

It was rough going, as there was no pathway, and the danger of falling, or slipping off the rocks was always present.

'Hey, stay away from those damp rocks. That bloody slime on them is a killer.' said Matt, after just about losing his footing.

The going was difficult, but after some time and effort they found themselves in a rather elevated spot, with a great view back on the lake.

'Shit, Matt, what a view! The colour of the water from up here seems so dark blue.'

Matt pointed at the mountains on the other side of the lake.

'I love the snow on those mountain tops. Do you reckon we should have a go at tackling them?'

Sandy laughed.

'I'm game.'

Matt put his hand up to his eyes, to protect them from the sun's rays, as he worked out how much sunlight they had left.

'I think we better start heading down. There's not too much daylight left, and we definitely don't want to get caught up here in the dark.'

'OK. When we get back down shall we take a drive around the lake, and see if we can find an abandoned place to crash the night?'

Both of them cracked up laughing.

'Yes, we will definitely do that.'

The road, which had been almost glued to the shoreline, suddenly veered inland, and away from the lake. Sandy wound down his window, and yelled out: 'Bye, Lake Wanaka! Thanks for the memories!'

'Nice place alright man. It was a good idea to stop off there for a while. It's cleared my head of guns and knives. Can you believe that shit? Anyway, I think shortly we will be entering into a massive National Park.'

'Yeah, and the infamous Haast Pass.'

Matt looked over at him, smiling.

'Well, you definitely surprised me there my friend. I thought I had managed to throw you right off the track with that one.'

Matt glanced at Sandy with a whimsical expression. In reply Sandy thumped him on the shoulder.

'A type of rugby pass. Yeah, I really needed the code breakers from Bletchley Park to help me crack that one.'

'Listen, I was doing it for your own good. I didn't want to unduly worry you. Plan B is basically to turn around, go all the way back to Christchurch, and then right on up the east coast, so we really need Plan A to work. I have faith in my piece of worn out old English metal. Trust the faithful Commer, Sandy, and it will always pay dividends.'

Sandy looked at the beauty surrounding them.

'One way or another, it's been bloody nice through here, so I will always be pleased we made the attempt, even if we do have to turn back.'

Matt leaned over and punched his friend on the arm.

'Hey, none of that defeatist talk, my friend. We need a serious dose of optimism, please.'

'Just look at this place. Those mountain ranges look really spectacular. So rugged. And the snow caps just make them look even more alluring.'

'Yeah, even though we are steadily climbing, this valley is really dwarfed on both sides. It must have taken those early gold rush explorers forever to find the right valleys to follow to cross to the other coast.'

Sandy looked over at Matt, and quipped:

'I bet they would have loved to have had a Commer van.'

'Now you're talking! That's what I want to hear.'

They both laughed. The steady flow of banter continued, as they wound their way through the valleys. After their day of rest all considerations of unpleasant people, and dangerous situations had been duly expunged from their thoughts. They were right where they wanted to be.

'How long have you known Felicity, Matt? She really is a lovely person. Do you...'

'Shit!' interrupted Matt. 'Hold on to your hat!'

Matt floored the accelerator. He hadn't seen the pass coming until they had turned what seemed like just another twist in a road full of twists and turns. Sandy howled with joy.

'You can do it, man. Go for it!'

Matt crashed down through the gears, trying to keep up as much speed as possible, but despite his best efforts the van pattered to a halt about a good 250 metres from the crest of the pass. Matt turned to his friend in reassuring mode. 'Hey, don't worry, Sandy. We weren't going anywhere near top speed. I hadn't expected to be on the pass so soon, so I was just cruising. Let's give it another shot.'

Matt let the van roll back down the hill, until he came to a spot where he could swing the van in, and turn it around. He then took off back down the hill.

'This time we'll get a better run up.'

He drove to the bottom, and returned at least a couple of kilometres along the road.

'This'll do us.'

He swung the van around a wider part of the road, but was unable to completely turn around.

'Hey man, jump out and push us back a bit will you?'

Sandy got out, and immediately got to work. The van was heavy, but it was on a flat piece of road, so with only some little effort he managed to push the van back the necessary amount, while Matt swung the wheels around.

'OK, that's enough! Jump in!'

'This is gonna be wild!' said Sandy excitedly as he closed the door.

Matt roared off, well, as much as his van was able to roar off, and built up as much speed as possible before returning to the base of the Haast Pass. They turned the final corner, and started the crucial ascent. Matt made sure he crashed down to third, and then to second, early enough not to lose the momentum they had gained, but, even though they flew past their earlier resting spot, the van ran out of motion still about a hundred metres from the top. The two looked at each other, and laughed.

'Plan B?' asked Sandy.

'Man, you really are a downer. You actually give up easily, don't you? Look how much further we've come! Listen, this time I'm gonna go back even further, maybe ten k's, in the meantime you stay here, and when I get up to this point you give us a push. What do ya reckon?'

Sandy slapped his hands together.

'Plan A is alive and kicking!'

Sandy jumped out of the van, and went into waiting mode, as Matt did a repeat performance of rolling backwards, and turning the van around. He roared off down the hill, a grim determination etched onto his face. He drove a long way back, not quite as far as Lake Wanaka, but probably not too distant from it. Without the help of Sandy, he had to wait until he could find a spot where he could completely swing the van around. After successfully turning around, he stopped the van. He sat there in quiet contemplation for a moment, quietly looking at the road in front of him. A feeling of grim determination came over him. Then he gunned it.

Sandy watched the van disappear around the corner at the bottom of the pass. He looked around at the beautiful, lush green growth. It was a far cry from the drier scenery of his native Australia. He doubted that in such a moist forest there would ever be any of the bush fires that he had been used to hearing about all his life. After the sound of the van had dissipated he could hear the full cacophony of the sounds of the wildlife. Although he could see none of it, he could tell that the bush was full of birds, and who knew what else. It was nothing short of magical to be standing there, alone, taking in all that the forest could offer him. He felt a part of it. At one with the natural scene that surrounded him. He couldn't remember ever having been in such a wondrous indelibly-natural setting.

Seemingly coming from a distant place, an alien sound started to intrude on nature's symphony, and he realised that a car was approaching, coming down from the top of the pass. He turned to look at it, as it slowed down when it got nearer to him. With a smile he realised that he must have made somewhat of an odd sight standing there, with no car, no backpack, just a man alone, in a lonely place. The car pulled to a halt on the other side of the road from him. He could see that it held two couples, one in the front, and the other in the back. They all looked to be young, probably mid twenties, or so. The driver wound down his window, and called out to him.

'Alright, mate? You stuck out here?'

Sandy walked over to the car with a broad grin on his face.

'Actually, it's a bit of a long story.'

The woman in the front passenger seat, a blonde with straight shoulder length hair, and a nice looking smile, leaned over towards the driver's window.

'We like long stories.'

By that time the back window had also been wound down, and all four of the occupants of the car were looking at Sandy expectantly.

'Well, hard though it may be to believe...'

Sandy related their situation, to a growing roll of laughter from all four of the people listening intently, as well as his own.

'Is ya mate an Aussie, too?' asked the driver.

'No, he's one of you lot.' replied Sandy.

'Well, that explains it.' said the guy in the back seat. 'When you put an Aussie and a Kiwi together it always spells nothing but trouble.'

None of them could stop laughing.

'I think you might be able to do with a hand there, mate.' said the driver.

Sandy laughed.

'That's an understatement.'

'Hold on, let me just park the car.'

The driver pulled the car off the road, and all four occupants started to get out. Sandy had been keeping an eye on the bottom of the hill, and then suddenly he saw the old banged out old van hurtle into view.

'Here he comes!'

All five of them ran over to the other side of the road, amidst much laughter, and giggling.

Matt had trouble keeping control of the van on the windy road. With the long wheel base, and probably a bit because of its age, it was a hard beast to control at its maximum speed. As he flew around what he knew to be the last corner he actually went across the middle white line, so out of control was the van. Luckily there was no traffic coming in the opposite direction. He brought the van back into line, and flew up the hill crashing down into third gear. It was only then that he noticed a car parked further up the hill, and a group of people standing around where he had left Sandy. A surge of pleasure flowed through him. With great elation he realised that Sandy had somehow managed to draft in reinforcements. Hope soared within him. He crashed the gear stick into second, and actually passed them all, still going at a relatively good speed. In his mirror he could see the group running behind him, trying to catch up for when their great strength and commitment would be required. He could also hear a lot of laughter, which made him laugh too. The van was running out of steam rapidly,

but by then the group had reached him, and were all pushing with all their might. On his own he had reached about fifty metres from the crest. With the failing efforts of the van's motor, and the momentum of the gathered labour force, they got ever closer to the top of the pass, until, almost unbelievably, the van reached an even keel. They had done it. The van was at the top of the Haast Pass. He wildly tooted the horn, which, in conjunction with the yells of delight from the assembled multitude, created a combined tumultuous roar of victory. Matt left the engine running, so the cooling fan would remain on, and pulled on the handbrake. He jumped out, and joined in the celebrations. Sandy clapped him on the shoulder.

'A piece of bloody cake!'

'And there you were with your plan B!'

Matt turned to the group from the car.

'Hey, thanks guys. We wouldn't have made it without your help. Thanks a lot.'

Amidst the general laughter one of the girls, the one who had been sitting in the back of the car, said:

'I hope you aren't going to attempt to get over Arthur's Pass in this thing.'

Matt laughed, and threw up his hands.

'Well, we weren't planning to, but now that we have your help, I think we might give it a shot.'

All of them laughed, except Sandy, who was a little bit unsure of the full extent of the joke.

'How much steeper is the other one?'

The driver of the car pointed down the hill they had just conquered.

'You see this? This is like a bump in the road compared to Arthur's Pass. In fact, we came this way because I wouldn't even trust my car to make it. Your van?'

Good luck!'

Sandy laughed, and turned to Matt.

'Fuck it, let's give it a try!'

The assembled group couldn't stop laughing. Matt, still laughing, addressed them again.

'Hey, seriously, thanks a lot. Things were looking a bit grim for a while there.'

'No sweat, mate.' said the guy who had been in the back seat. 'Glad we could be of help. Good luck on your travels.'

Matt and Sandy said their goodbyes to the four heroes of the day who wandered, still laughing and giggling, back down to their car.

'Nice job, Sandy. Good move, my friend.'

Sandy humbly accepted his friend's thanks, even though, in reality the car full of indispensable helpers had stopped without any intervention, or effort on his behalf.

'You know what this means, Sandy? We are now about to cruise down to the world famous West Coast. Jump in fella, your carriage awaits.'

As could have been expected, the downwards side of the Pass held no complications for them. From then on the winding road, mainly in descent from that point on, but still with some small hills, took them through the rest of the national park, and then shortly thereafter they found themselves with the edge of the park on one side, and a wide sandy river bed on the other. Little water was flowing along the river. After heavy rains, and in the spring, when all the snow on the mountains melted, it would no doubt turn into a raging, turbulent onslaught. But that would be for other days. The scenery on both sides of the road was one of great tranquillity.

'You know, Matt, we have done a bit of bush walking, and stuff, but it would be good to actually go up something like a recognised trail, don't you think? Instead of clambering over slippery rocks.'

'Why not? Good idea. Actually this area is full of trails, with cabins dotted here and there where you can spend the night. The thing is, you really need some professional advice. You do not want to get caught out in the mountains in this season.'

'What do you suggest, then?'

'Well, we need some info, like from a tourist information point. Trouble is, looking at the map, there probably won't be one of those, maybe until we get a fair way up the coast. It's pretty isolated around here.'

Sandy was somewhat placated, but also resolute.

'OK, we'll put it on the back burner for now, but when it's possible I would really love to do that.'

'Sure, me too, Also further up the coast there are a couple of glaciers. You know, ice-age shit.'

That quickly got Sandy's interest.

'Really? Are you allowed to go onto them?'

Matt turned to look at his friend with admonishment.

'Are you allowed to sleep in abandoned houses? Are you allowed to liberate lonely forlorn chairs? Since when have we ever followed the rules?'

'Well, what with all your talk of danger, etc.'

Matt laughed.

'Don't worry, that's all just stuff we make up to scare the tourists. We can do it all, believe me, no problems.'

Sandy looked at Matt with a fairly uncertain air about him.

'I think I'll go with the professional advice.'

Then both of them laughed.

'Yeah, you're probably not too far wrong there, my friend.' replied Matt.

Right at that point they traversed a corner, and could see, off in the distance, the glistening mass of the Tasman Sea.

'There she is, Matt!'

'There she is, indeed. Looks like the old girl has managed to get us over. Who would have bet money on that?'

'Me, for one. I love this van.'

Sandy took the map from the dashboard, and examined it.

'It looks like we hug the coast a bit, then do a bit of inland stuff. Then we don't really get back to the coast until we've passed those glaciers.'

'Well, I'm gonna hold off swimming until we are a lot further north, so that's fine for me.'

They followed the road along a gulley, until it came to a very sturdy looking bridge, which took them across the wide, mostly empty, river bed. Shortly after they found themselves driving along parallel to the sea. Sandy pointed to the white crests of the breaking waves.

'Shit, there are some pretty fierce waves coming in today. I think you really should hold off on that swim for a while.'

Matt laughed.

'Yup, not going in that. Looks bloody cold too.'

After not many kilometres the road turned sharply inland, and they found themselves once again in wild bushland, following the valleys through mainly low sized hills, but always with some bigger mountain ranges to be seen further inland. The scenery, as ever, was nothing short of spectacular, as the road took them through valleys, near small lakes, and across many bridges. The only thing missing was much sign of civilisation. They had barely even seen any farm houses. It was remoteness personified.

'Hey, slow down, Matt. There's some sort of sign up ahead. Fuck, I hope it's a coffee shop.'

Matt burst out laughing as he slowed the van.

'Not looking forward to your lunch today?'

'Hey, it's a Ranger Station!'

'What?' said Matt, as he turned into the parking area. 'They actually call them Rangers? What, are we in Yogi Bear country?'

'Let's see about some bush trails.' said Sandy as he enthusiastically jumped out of the van.

The two of them strolled into the Ranger Station which, in appearance, seemed to be fairly similar to a tourist information centre, except for the personnel running it. The office was staffed by a giant of a man, in a light green, fairly casual looking uniform.

'Hi there, guys, what can I help you with?'

If nothing else he seemed to be incredibly friendly. He was so incredibly muscular, that even his cheek bones seemed to have muscles on them. Matt assumed that the local steroid factory must have been working overtime to fulfil all his needs. Sandy, knowing that Matt had better local knowledge, left it up to his mate to make all the relevant enquiries, while he limited himself to studying, with great interest, all the maps, and associated paraphernalia on display.

'Hi, we are looking for a trail to do. One with a cabin we can stay the night in. Something relatively easy, because by the time we have a quick lunch there will only be 4 or 5 hours of sunlight left, so we don't really want anything too extreme. Is there anything like that around here?'

The ranger nodded, and smiled.

'There sure is. There's a beauty for you, with the trail head just a kilometre up the road. The cabin has a wood stove in it, and we make sure there is always a good supply of freshly chopped firewood. I actually run up to that cabin every morning before work. One hour, and I'm up and back.'

'Brilliant. Sounds just what we are after.'

Sandy, looking at the perfect physical form of the ranger, thought it best to get a bit more clarification. He was worried that Matt was taking it all a bit too lightly.

'Actually, we're definitely not in your league physically, and we won't be running up, but walking, carrying the weight of our backpacks with all the essentials to stay the night. Realistically, how long do you think it would take us, under those conditions?'

The ranger waved the question away in a sign of something akin to disdain.

'Oh, bugger all. Probably an hour and a half at the most, I would say.'

Sandy seemed satisfied. Even allowing for gross optimism they should be able to get there in a couple of hours, well before dusk. Matt shook the rangers hand, and asked him one last question.

'Maybe tomorrow morning you can run up with some bacon and eggs for our breakfast? What do you say?'

The ranger roared with laughter.

'Sure thing. I'll bring you up the newspaper as well.'

In the midst of the laughter, Sandy and Matt headed back to the van, jumped in, and drove further up the road. Exactly as stated they found the trail head, with even a perfect parking bay suitable for their van's limited capabilities.

'I'll get a fire going Sandy, you start preparing the veggies. A quick lunch, and we're off.'

'Shit, I can't wait.'

Diligently the two of them went through the well rehearsed motions of the Mulligory Ceremony, both wanting to get on up the trail as soon as possible. In no time at all they were filling their faces, and discussing the upcoming adventure.

'I think we should travel light, Matt. Just the necessary clothes for the colder weather up there, our sleeping bags, and some biscuits for dinner. What do you reckon?'

'Brilliant. But I'm gonna take up the billy as well, and some tea. If we have a wood stove in the cabin, we may as well live the life of Riley.'

'Makes sense. A nice cuppa in the morning does sound pretty civilised. What better way to start the day?'

'No need to lower our standards, my friend.'

In short order, lunch utensils had been washed, backpacks prepared, and everything else squared away in the van. The boys were ready to hit the trail. First off they had to cross a small wooden bridge, and the trail head seemed to be right on the other side.

'That looks like the trail there, Matt. Doesn't it?'

Sandy pointed to what he took to be the start of the trail. Matt looked around surveying the options,

'Yeah, I guess so. Let's do it.'

Off they tramped, with the greatest of endeavour and enthusiasm, a marvellous new challenge opening up in front of them. Excitement and exuberance flowed through their veins. They would be unstoppable. Well, initially anyway. The trail proved to be immediately difficult, and the signing of the correct direction very intermittent. Their initial zeal quickly became somewhat muted by the apparent lack of trail indications.

'Man, they don't do much maintenance of the trail, huh Sandy? I guess not many people actually come up here, apart from Mr Steroids of course.'

'Yeah, I must admit I thought it would be easier going, too. Where is the trail from here? I can't see any sign of it.'

Matt pointed up into the bush.

'Look, there's a little red ribbon tied around that branch. That must be it, I guess.'

'There's not exactly much of a trail laid out, but I guess it must be. Hey look there, right up the top of that slope. There is a bit of what looks like brown ribbon tied around that branch. I guess we just keep on following those ribbons, right?'

Matt was also more than a little dubious, but there seemed to be no other option available.

'Yeah, I suppose so.'

The going was extremely difficult, the trail poorly marked, except for those occasional odd-coloured ribbons. Their progress was slow and arduous. Even with the cooler temperatures which they encountered the higher they climbed, both of them were sweating from the exertion. Matt wiped his brow.

'And that bloody idiot runs up and down in an hour? I think we must have been at it for nearly two hours, and we are getting nowhere.'

'Oh my God, Matt look at this!'

Both of them stared in amazement. In front of them was a veritable sea of shale fragments, each no more than 3 or 4 centimetres square, and razor thin. Matt took off his pack.

'Are you fucking kidding me?'

Sandy also dropped his pack.

'I think I might test this first.'

As he attempted to cross the sea of shale, the shale slipped down, with him in its flow, towards the cliff face which was at the edge of a straight drop of at least 400 metres. He quickly backtracked, and clambered back onto steady footing.

'Fucking hell, you've got to be joking!'

Matt pointed a bit further up.

'If we go across there, running as fast as possible I think we should be able to get across.'

'What? Before being dragged down to certain death, you mean?'

'Yeah.'

'OK, I just wanted to clarify that. Fuck it, I'll go first.' volunteered Sandy.

They climbed further up the slope to what seemed like a good starting off point. After checking that the straps of his pack were all firmly tightened, Sandy threw himself into the landslide. In reality it was only about 15 metres wide, but as he

fought his way across, first on his feet, then dropping onto his hands and knees, he was being dragged down towards the cliff face at roughly the same speed as he was getting across. Matt could hear the steady stream of shale pieces going over the edge of the cliff and into the abyss. Sandy made it across with only about ten to twelve metres to spare from the edge of the precipice. He threw himself flat on the ground.

'Fuck, that was exciting! What a rush! Come on, man, get on with it!'

Matt was rather reluctant, but he realised that his options were rather limited. In reality they were limited to one. He too threw himself into the sliding cauldron. First running on his feet, then throwing himself to his hands and knees as he fought his way across, all the while being dragged down towards the cliff face, and certain death. He exited at roughly the same point Sandy had, with Sandy grabbing hold of him and helping to pull him to safety. He looked back in bewilderment at the sea of shale they had just traversed.

'This is a fucking strange trail, Sandy. I've never heard of anything like this before.'

Sandy gave him an encouraging slap on the shoulder.

'I'm enjoying it! It's a real challenge. This is living!'

'Yeah, living on the fucking edge.'

'Don't be such a pessimist, this is a real adventure.'

Matt got to his feet, and brushed the remaining pieces of shale off his clothes.

'OK, if you say so. Anyway, can you see any more of those bloody ribbons?'

'No, but it looks like the trail heads further up along there, see?'

'Onwards, and upwards, me old china.' said Matt.

They continued on their way, constantly battling to actually understand where the trail was. In fact many times they would have to stop, and waste precious time doubling back, trying to work out exactly which was the correct way. After roughly another hour of slow going, but of great exertion, Matt looked to the sky.

'It's too late to go back now, we wouldn't make it down before dark. We've got to go on now.'

'Of course we're going on! I'm sure the cabin will be just a bit further ahead.'

Matt was starting to have serious doubts as to whether they would find the cabin, and also as to whether they were even on the correct trail, or, for that matter, actually on a trail. Nonetheless, late as it was, there was nothing to be done but to keep on forging ahead with grim determination. They had long since passed the point of no return. With always constantly struggling to understand where the trail was, they were losing precious time.

'Up there, Matt! Look! There's another ribbon. Thank God for that.'

They both climbed up to the tree with the ribbon, and looked around for the obvious way forward. By then they had reached the snow line, and the ground was starting to be covered in snow. The snow was patchy at first, but shortly thereafter the terrain was completely covered with snow. The temperature by that point had dropped dramatically.

'Come on, Matt! Let's pick the pace up. I'm sure we're nearly there, but it would be good to have some light left to get the stove burning.'

Matt followed his friend, caught up in his optimism, or possibly his desperation. The light was fading fast. Dusk was setting in, and there was still no sign of the elusive cabin. Even Sandy's eternal confidence was starting to be tested. Doubt was starting to set in.

'Let's drop out backs here, and run ahead. We've got to find the cabin. I'm sure we're nearly there. It's probably just a bit further up ahead.'

They both unstrapped their backpacks, and headed on at a faster pace, being lighter. But even with their quickened pace, and with the light having nearly totally disappeared, there was still no cabin. Matt realised that it was all over.

'OK, stop Sandy. We've got to get back to our gear while we can still see, and try and find a place to set up for the night.'

'I'm sure it's just a little way ahead.'

Matt grabbed his arm.

'We don't know that. We can't afford to not find our sleeping bags in the dark. Not in this cold. Come on, man. It's time to give up the search for the non-existent cabin.'

Sandy briefly looked further along the trail, and then reluctantly realised that his friend was right. If, in the dark, they couldn't find their packs things would quickly go from bad to worse, and they were already bad enough. They fought their way in the semi-darkness, back to their gear. Then they wandered around trying to find somewhere to sleep the night. Somewhere at least a little protected from the snow.

'Hey, Sandy, over there. Look!'

Matt was pointing to the silhouette of a rocky outcrop, that could just be made out in the last light of the coming night. They both fought their way over, being whacked in the face all the while by unseen branches. The rocky outcrop was small, but below it there was a flat piece of rock, snow free, with just enough room to lay out their sleeping bags. They had found a minimal haven. They both put on all the clothes they had with them, unravelled their sleeping bags, and crawled into them. A slight wind was picking up. The cold was biting.

'What are the chances that we will survive the night?' Sandy quietly asked. Matt laughed.

'You're a real fucking drama queen, you know?'

'You were the one telling me stories of being stuck up in the mountains. Well, guess what? We are.'

'Dude, we've got our sleeping bags, and plenty of warm clothes. We'll be 'right as rain. You worry too much.'

Sandy was about to reproach his friend for his flippancy, when he realised that Matt had already fallen asleep! He couldn't believe it. How could anyone be so casual, so nonchalant, in such a dangerous situation? He himself was so agitated that he knew he would have a sleepless night ahead of him. In fact, he was sure it was better to face the difficult night in a heightened state of alert. Falling asleep could be fatal. He vowed to make sure that he stayed awake, and that he would regularly check to see whether his friend was still breathing, and didn't just slip off into death. The cold was intense, the wind coming off the snow biting. If only they had left half an hour earlier he was sure that they would have been able to find the cabin. He lay there rugged up in his sleeping bag against the increasing cold.

Not sure if they would survive the night, his mind wandered over all the things he had left unsaid, and the things he had said without thinking them through properly. Would he be remembered as having been a good person? He had never set out to hurt anyone, but quite often in life, people's sensibilities can be easily bruised. Had he acted in the best possible way he could? Would people remember him fondly? The steady sound of the incessant wildlife kept his level of alertness high. Just what sort of animals were there in that part of the world? A part of the world still quite foreign to him. A violent high-pitched scream broke through the night. Instinctively he leaned over to shake Matt awake, but then thought the better of it. If they were to die, what better way than to submit peacefully in your sleep? He would stand guard, he would document with his memory their final hours, if that were to be the outcome. His head weighed heavy. The thoughts constant. He could see a blurry shadow gliding over the distant white plains. He tried to call out, but words wouldn't come from his mouth. The dark foreboding clouds fell ever lower until they were at one with the landscape. A never-ending horizon of whiteness. A kaleidoscope of nothingness. He felt so small, and defenceless. The dark clouds amassed, and seemed to start hurtling themselves at him, he wanted to run, but he was stuck to the spot. He couldn't move his legs. He could hear himself screaming, but the screams seemed alien, distant, as if they were coming from another version of

himself. He could almost feel the presence of death watching over him, waiting patiently for him to let go. He felt overcome with panic. He tried desperately to hold himself firm.

With a start Sandy awoke. He poked his head out of his sleeping bag. He was still alive. It had all been a dream, a nightmare. How could he possibly have fallen asleep at a time like that? He looked around with great anxiety. The sky was slowly starting to lighten, dawn was in the making. The tension started to drain from his body as he realised that he had made it through the night. In a panic he thought of Matt. Was he too still alive? With a sense of terror mixed with betrayal, about having let his guard fall, he was about to check on his friend when he heard a low snoring sound coming from the inside of Matt's sleeping bag. He laughed out loud. He had fallen asleep, and Matt was snoring away in his sleeping bag! In the face of such danger, they had both acquiesced to normality. Life was indeed a strange thing. He sat up, and watched the new dawn slowly turn into day. Never had the burgeoning light of a new day felt so good to him. A new day that he had seriously wondered whether the two of them would ever see.

A hand, followed by a head, popped out from Matt's sleeping bag. 'What time did that ranger say he was gonna bring up the bacon and eggs?' Matt sat up.

'Hey, look! My sleeping bag is completely frozen solid on the outside!'

'Yeah, mine too.' answered Sandy.

'Still nice and warm inside though. How did you sleep? I slept like a log. Man, was I buggered after all that climbing.'

Sandy just looked at him in wonder, and laughed in reply. Matt rubbed his eyes, and surveyed the scene with the early light of day.

'Actually we were pretty lucky to find this spot. It's reasonably protected. Not bad going considering how dark it was. We did well.'

'I wonder how much further ahead that cabin is? Do you think we should have a bit of a look?'

Matt's expression turned stern.

'Hey Sandy, we are not on any trail here. Give it up. If we were ever on the right one, we lost it a long way back. A trail doesn't go over a shifting sea of small pieces of shale. Let's just get the hell out of here. When our sleeping bags thaw out, they will become wet all through. If we have to spend another night up here we will freeze to death in them.'

'How about some breakfast?'

'Yeah,' said Matt, rummaging around in his pack for some biscuits. 'But there's no chance of finding any dry firewood up here. We'll boil up the billy when we get down to the van.'

Matt took a couple of biscuits from the packet, and then handed it over to Sandy.

'Matt, do you think we should go back and tell the ranger all about this?'

'Naw, fuck Mr. Steroids. That prick didn't do us any favours. Come on, let's pack up, and get the hell out of here. The sooner the better.'

The return trip down was physically easier, but otherwise almost as difficult as it had been in ascent. The trail was still just as hard to find, those small coloured ribbons few, and far between. If nothing else, at least the crossing of the sea of slipping shale held no fear for them. They knew they could conquer that. In fact, in a sort of delirious elation they both felt like they could just about conquer anything, after having survived their night trapped in the snow on a mountain range. Something that has been known to be fatal for lesser men. They, however, were made of studier stuff. They were undefeatable. Down, down they went, the freezing cold giving way to just really cold. Sandy grabbed Matt's arm.

'Shit look, man, there it is.'

Sandy pointed to the little clearing that was just before the small wooden bridge they had crossed from the car park.

'We've made it!'

Matt slapped his friend on the arm.

'Yup, time for a bloody cup of tea, mate!'

With great relief they hastened to the Commer van, patiently waiting for them, completely unaware of the dramatic situation its occupants had found themselves in. Matt threw his pack up against the side of the van, and set about making a fire for the billy.

'What about our sleeping bags, Matt? it's gonna be hard to dry them out, don't you think?'

'Well, if the sun warms up we can put them across the top of the van when we stop for lunch, I guess.'

'Where did you put those biscuits?'

Matt threw the packet of biscuits across to Sandy, and got the cups ready for the tea. As soon as the water had boiled he threw in a few tea bags, and let them infuse in the hot water for a couple of minutes. When he deemed that the colour of the water was appropriately dark enough, he poured the water into the cups.

Then he sat down next to Sandy, who was sitting with his back against the van, and handed him his cup.

'Get this into you. It'll do you the world of good.'

'I must say you seem pretty stoic about having just survived a pretty dangerous situation. Is that some sort of tough-guy New Zealand thing?'

Matt threw back his head, and laughed almost uncontrollably.

'You think too much.'

'Well, you told me about people dying when they are stranded out in the bush, and stuff. That just about happened to us, and here you are merrily drinking a cup of tea.'

'Listen. That is all about people who go off into the hills on a sunny afternoon, not expecting to have to sleep the night out there. Then they get lost. They aren't prepared for anything but a casual walk in warm temperatures. Then, when those temperatures drop heavily at night, they find themselves right in the shit. That wasn't us. We were prepared. We had our packs, with plenty of warm clothing, and our sleeping bags. We had even sought advice from a professional. We did everything right. Well, except that is, to place our trust in the wrong guy. Hey, time to let it go.'

'I want to be a Kiwi.'

They both laughed heartily.

'I'm afraid, my son, that that requires a twenty-year apprenticeship. Minimum.'

Their laughter continued, unabated.

Chapter Six: The Wilds of the West

They had barely been back on the road for little more than an hour, when the signposts started. One undertaking of great interest had only just finished, and the next one was right there, just in front of them. Matt was hoping for a slightly less dangerous undertaking, not that they seemed to have much control over that which was constantly being thrown in their path.

'Even been up on a glacier, Sandy?'

'No, but I will be soon.'

'That's the spirit.'

'What the fuck are we gonna do about those wet sleeping bags? It's not really gonna warm up that much today.'

Matt pulled the van over to the side of the road, and stopped.

'Yeah, you're right. Hey, pass me the map.'

Sandy opened the map so that they could both have a good look at it. Matt traced the road with a finger.

'How about this? We have a look at Fox Glacier, then stop for a good cook up. You know, that stuff you like so much. After that we can do a straight run up to Hokitika. We can get a room, or a hostel there. Something with heating, so we can dry out our sleeping bags. What say ye?'

Sandy was on board with the idea.

'Brilliant! We can have a bit of a night out as well. We should at the very least celebrate the fact that we are still alive, which is by no means no little feat. A few beers could well be called for.'

Matt nodded in agreement.

'I think I'll join you on that one. We might even find some good tucker. Pies, anyone?'

They both laughed.

'Yeah, fuck being a vegetarian.' replied Sandy, through his laughter.

'No need to be fanatical about these things. All things in moderation, my son.'

Matt engaged second gear, and pulled back out onto the road. They had hardly gone further than a couple of kilometres when they came upon the glacier. Well, the sign for it at least. Sandy pointed to an entranceway off to the side of the road.

'Look. That looks like the car park for the glacier.'

Matt glided the van into the car park, and stopped in a spot where he couldn't be blocked in. Not that there was much danger of that anyway. There weren't many other cars there. It was definitely not high season for glacier visiting. Only fools, and the carefree, were out and about in such polar conditions. They both grabbed their jackets, and got out of the van, looking for the correct path to follow. A path which was not immediately apparent. It appeared that in general the boys had great difficulty perceiving the presence of the correct course to follow. It was becoming somewhat of a habit for them.

'I guess we just follow the river bed up, Matt. I hope it's not too far, my legs are still pretty sore from that bloody mountain trail.'

Matt winced slightly, and laughed.

'Yeah, mine too. That was a pretty steep climb. The climb to nowhere.'

'I'm sure that bloody cabin was just a bit further along. We just ran out of daylight.'

Matt eyed him whimsically.

'Don't get me started.'

They walked along the trail beside the almost dry river bed.

'Hey, Sandy, check out this sign. '10,000 years ago', I guess that means that the glacier came up to here back then.'

'I guess we will soon find out how far it has retreated in the last ten thousand years, then?'

'Yeah, let's count the footsteps.'

'You're a bit of a smart-ass bastard, you know Matt?'

'You're just figuring that out now? Slow learner. No wonder I keep getting lost, following your bloody advice.'

The track went round a corner, with still no sign of the glacier Matt had been expecting to see.

'Bloody hell, I thought it would be right here. Shit, my legs are killing me. Shall I go and get the van?'

Sandy laughed.

'Don't worry, I'll find someone to help us push it up onto the glacier.'

By that time Sandy had taken as a given that he had completely, and unilaterally, organised the pushing brigade for the victorious assault on the Haast Pass. It had become an established undisputed fact. He merely asked for credit where credit was due.

'I'm sure you would.'

Matt joined in the laughter. If nothing else it helped to pass the time, as they

pushed on with their tired legs. Luckily, for those tired legs, they didn't have long to wait. The view in front of them had been obscured by a great rocky outcrop, until they walked around another corner along the stony trail. Then the full might of the glacier came into sight. Both of them stopped in their tracks. Amazed. Stunned.

'Wow, will you look at that, Sandy. Pretty impressive, eh?'

The might, and wonder, of the enormous glacier opened up before their eyes. A gigantic river, frozen in time. The sun, reflecting off the mass of ice, only added to the beauty of the sight. The enormity of how cold the past era would have had to have been to freeze such a mass of water totally overwhelmed them.

'Matt, how the hell could people have survived in such a cold period? Man, were we ever born in the right period of history.'

'That's for sure. Back then it would just have been all about actually surviving. Having fun would have definitely been an unknown concept.'

Sandy pointed to what was essentially a small creek flowing out of the base of the glacier.

'Look, you can see just a small flow of water flowing out of the bottom of it. It's not exactly melting fast today. Looking at it, though, I must admit I sort of thought it would be like a big wall of ice, not just this gradual incline.'

The lower part of the glacier was like the smaller end of a funnel, gradually growing in size as it moved up higher.

'Well if it's been melting all these centuries it stands to reason that the lower part would be the part melting first. Anyway, instead of going straight up on it, why don't we stay on the rocky bank at the side, until we get a bit higher up? It would make for easier going than trying to climb up on the ice.'

Sandy surveyed the options. That was definitely the best one.

'With you there, brother.'

They stayed to the left of the glacier, and walked up the difficult, partly rocky, partly grassy terrain. When they were well up into the higher part of the glacier, they tentatively ventured out onto the ice. It was somewhat slippery, but with their tried and true bushwear approved boots, it was relatively easily navigated.

'Wow, this is insane!' laughed Sandy. 'If the glacier was up to that point ten thousand years ago, I wonder how old the ice is that we are walking on now?'

'Good point. I would guess hundreds of thousands of years. Maybe more.'

'Actually it's pretty easy walking. Quite solid underfoot.'

'I doubt the temperature is much more than 5 or 6 degrees, so it won't be melting much in that temperature.' Matt waved around, with his hand. 'It's

incredible isn't it. There are a few people up there, another couple across there, and that's all. We're on a glacier, such a brilliant tourist spot, and nobody's home.'

'Yeah, if it was in America it would be packed. Thank God it's not!'

'Mind you,' retorted Matt, 'if it was in America there would be a burger joint next to it, so it wouldn't be that bad.'

They both laughed.

'Yeah Matt, every glacier needs a burger bar.'

'Yeah? Well, tell me that in the same cynical tone of voice when you are eating your Mulligory delight.'

'Hhmm, good point. Although actually, I don't know why you always go on about that. I love that stew.'

Matt was never fully convinced of his friend's true appreciation of his culinary abilities.

'Well then, today is your lucky day. You will be wishing there was a...'

Just then their banter was interrupted by a piercing scream of pain. Both of them quickly looked towards the direction of the scream. They saw a woman, part of a little group further up the glacier, lying flat on her back, grimacing in pain. She had obviously had a bad fall.

'Hey Sandy, check out her shoes. Remember those people who die in the bush because they aren't prepared for the conditions? Put her name on the list.'

Sandy just shook his head.

'So young, and yet so cold hearted. What did they do to you when you were a little kid?'

Matt ignored the taunt, and pointed down along the slope of the glacier.

'Hey, shall we do some slippery-sliding?'

Sandy burst out laughing.

'I can spot a set up a mile away. You would just love to see me fall flat on my arse, wouldn't you?'

Matt put on the most innocent face he could muster.

'Now why on earth would I take enjoyment out of something like that?'

Both of them cracked up laughing.

'Listen, Matt. Let's get a couple of photos of each other at the base of the glacier, and get the hell out of here. I'm freezing my bollocks off.'

'Yeah, let's find somewhere to have lunch. I need a nice hot bowl of the good veggies to warm me up.'

'Yeah, me too. Shame there isn't a burger bar here, no?'

Matt slapped his friend on the back, and laughed.

'I'm sorry, but you've come to the wrong country, pal.'

With still a good hour of sunlight remaining, the van crossed the Hokitika river, and cruised into the town itself. Matt slowed down.

'Why don't we just drive right through, looking for places to stay, and places to eat at later on. What do you ya reckon, Sandy?'

'Good thinking. Slow it down more, and I'll keep my eyes open.'

Matt slowed to well under the speed limit as they entered the actual town centre, so they could take in fully the main drag. He assumed that most of the places would either be on the main street, or signposted off it. Sandy pointed to the left of the road.

'Well, there's a motel. It'll probably be a bit expensive, but if we can't find anything else we can have a look. Hey, slow down, stop! There's a Chinese restaurant on the right. That would make a good change, don't you think?'

Matt was in full agreement.

'Yeah. Can you see if it says BYO?'

'Hold on, I'll shoot over and have a look.'

Matt had stopped the van in the middle of the road. It wasn't worth going through the whole parking drama just for the time it would take Sandy to run across the road. Sandy jumped out of the van, carefully avoided the non-existent traffic flowing through the town, and crossed the road. Matt saw him go into the restaurant. He checked his rear-view mirror, and saw that there were no cars approaching from behind. Still, he wasn't exactly thrilled about where he had stopped. He was blocking one side of the street completely. When Sandy didn't come out of the restaurant immediately, Matt wondered if he might have been somewhat tempted to have a quick snack. His impatience grew. Just as he was considering different parking options, Sandy re-emerged, and ran back to the van.

'Took your fucking time, didn't ya? Have you already had dinner, mate?'

Matt's tone of voice displayed all his disapproval. Disapproval completely ignored by Sandy.

'Actually, I bring good tidings. There wasn't anything written outside, so I went inside to ask about the BYO business, which they said was fine. While I was there I took the opportunity to ask about cheap places to stay around here. Guess what? There's a camping ground, with bungalows, just outside town. He reckons the bungalows have wood stoves in them, and warm up pretty well.'

Matt nodded his head in appreciation.

'Shit, nice one. Well done. Where is this camping ground?'

'Straight along, just past the cemetery, first road on the left. Which actually also goes down to the beach, so you can have a swim in the morning, while I watch, and laugh.'

Matt again checked his mirror, and gunned the beast along the road.

'Actually I'd have one now, if it wasn't so late.'

Sandy just laughed.

'It's not as if the temperature of the water changes just because the sun sets.'

'It's a psychological thing. The warming power of just seeing the sun. You wouldn't understand.'

Sandy pointed to the right.

'Fish and chip shop there, if you want to change your mind, Matt.'

'Very tempting. Is that the third, or fourth, pub we've passed?'

'Yeah, we don't need to worry about finding one of them. It looks like they like their beer on the West Coast.'

'I think they like it all over New Zealand.'

They both laughed.

'Even some of us Aussies like the occasional drop. Hold up! That's the cemetery, next street on the left.'

Matt swung the van around the corner, and slowed down. Sandy pointed ahead, on the right.

'That's the entrance, there.'

Matt pulled into the camping ground entrance, and stopped in front of the office. He could see that the toilet block was up a slight rise on the right, and that bungalows were spread out here and there, leaving spots for tents in between. He pointed to a bungalow halfway between the van and the toilet block.

'See if we can have that one.'

'Why?'

'Because its parking spot is on an incline, so...'

Sandy cut him off mid sentence.

'OK, got it.' he said as he jumped out of the van, and ran to the office.

'Hey, I'm thinking about you, ya fucking prick!' yelled Matt to no one.

Matt liked what he saw. The camping ground was well spread out, with lots of trees that would provide essential shade in the summer months. There were a few caravans dotted here and there, some of which looked as if they had become permanent places of abode. One even had a wooden deck built along the front of it. Matt warmed to the idea. It seemed to him to be a good alternative to the renting, or buying, a house dilemma. Shortly the passenger

door opened. Sandy was waving a key in his hand, and grinning.

'All sorted. There's a good supply of wood in the bungalow, and if we need more there's plenty just on the left here, after the office.'

'We'll be needing more.'

Sandy laughed along with him.

'That's for sure. We are gonna stoke that baby up before we head off to eat. Otherwise, we'll be sleeping just in our clothes.'

Matt glided into the bungalow's parking spot, and stopped the van. They both went straight in, without their belongings, to check out their new temporary home.

'Nice one, Sandy. Well sorted. I'll even let you choose if you want the top bunk, or the bottom one.'

'After last night's rock, I really couldn't care.'

Matt went straight to work, getting the wood stove fired up.

'Sandy, there's a length of rope in the van, under my seat. Grab it, and tie one end up there on the bunk ladder, and the other end over there on that coat hook. Then we'll throw our sleeping bags over it.'

'On it.'

As the fire took hold, the bungalow, being quite small, heated up almost at once. After Sandy had tied the rope in place, he completely unzipped their sleeping bags, and threw them across it.

'Actually, the sleeping bags are still pretty dry on the inside, you know Matt. It shouldn't take too long to dry them out.'

'Hey, what say we get all our stuff sorted out here, then pick up some beers, and head down to the beach. Before going for dinner we can come back, and throw some more wood in the stove.'

'Yeah, but how about we do it all on foot? There's a pub right on the corner, where we turned off, and the beach is just a stone's throw away.'

'I like it.'

After finishing sorting out things in their new lavish abode, lavish at least compared to what they were used to, Sandy and Matt walked up the road, back in the direction of the main street. Attached to the pub on the corner there was the usual ubiquitous bottle shop selling drinks to take away.

'Listen Sandy, why don't we just pick up half a dozen cans for now, and then when we head up to the restaurant we can pick up some more.'

'Yeah, that makes sense. Saves us carrying them all over the place. Plus they will stay nice and cool.'

'Yeah, we wouldn't want them to warm up in these tropical conditions, right?'

Sandy smiled, and punched him on the shoulder.

'Exactly.'

While Matt went into the shop to purchase their beer Sandy wandered around the corner, and looked further along the street at the entrance to the cemetery. The whole setting was one of great beauty. There was a tree-lined entranceway, surrounded by the greenest of vegetation, of all shapes and colours. He couldn't help thinking that it would be a pleasant place for friends and family to visit their loved ones, and, why not? a nice place to spend eternity. It would indeed be the finest of places to rest in peace.

'Thinking about your mortality?'

Sandy laughed in a slightly embarrassed way. He hadn't heard Matt approach.

'Actually I was.'

'Well, while there's still some life in you, let's head down to the beach and get stuck in to some brewskies.'

'Yeah, you never know when it might be your last one.'

Matt glanced at him disconcertedly.

'Man, are you fun to be with. I must remember to keep you and cemeteries at arm's length. They have a bad effect on you.'

The boys made their way back down past the camping ground, and further along the road to the beach. There they sat down on the sand, opened a can of beer each, and looked out at the dusk-filled sky, still emanating the day's last shimmering rays, as it was disappearing over the horizon, sinking gracefully into the quiet depths of the sea. They were surrounded by almost total silence, broken only by the quiet lapping of the incoming waves. It was a scene not only of great beauty, but also one of great tranquillity.

'Since we've hit the West Coast I think this is the quietest I've seen the sea.' said Sandy.

'Yeah, strange really. It has quite a reputation for being pretty wild, and stormy.'

'Let's drink to quieter times.'

'Cheers. It's just what we need, you know? We can probably do with a bit of a break.' Matt laughed. 'We've had a pretty wild ride of it lately.'

Sandy spluttered on his beer, and spat some out while he was laughing.

'That's putting it mildly!'

'Mind you,' said Matt, opening another beer, 'that's probably what they invented booze for. The perfect solution for everything.'

'Too right, I'll drink to that. Pass me over another one.'

The two of them were sitting there serenely, looking light-heartedly out on the ever darker sea view, when the first drops started to fall.

'Oh, for fucks sake!' yelled Matt, as he quickly jumped up. 'Come on Sandy, move it! When it rains down here the floodgates bloody open.'

No sooner were the words out of his mouth when the spluttering drops turned into a heavy downpour. The two of them ran back towards the camping ground. They had only been about a hundred metres from their bungalow, but by the time they got back inside, they were both completely soaking wet.

'Can you believe this shit?' said Matt laughing. 'We can't even have a quiet beer in peace.'

Sandy just shrugged his shoulders, and pointed at the fired-up wood stove, emanating a great amount of heat.

'It could be worse.'

'Just my luck, to be stuck in hell with a fucking optimist.'

Sandy was feeling pretty uncomfortable in his wet clothes, notwithstanding the heat in the bungalow.

'What say we hit the showers?'

Matt was in full agreement.

'Yeah, let's grab out stuff, and drive up. Hey, you know what? Now that we've got to dry these clothes out too, what say after the shower we just go and get some fish and chips, and some more beers? We've got to get things sorted out here.'

Sandy was already pulling some dry clothes out of his pack.

'Yeah, I've pretty much lost the celebratory mood as well. Plus it doesn't sound as if that rain is gonna ease up any time soon. Remember to stop for some more firewood on the way back in. I think we're going to need that potbelly stove to be fired up for a while yet.'

'Yeah, that's for sure. Like all night long.'

In the serenity and quietness of the early morning, Matt had got the stove fired up as quietly as possible, and was sipping on a nice hot cup of tea. Sandy was still fast asleep, sprawled with one leg actually dangling over the side of the top bunk. Matt had already taken down the dry clothes, and untied the rope they had been hanging from. Inside the cabin it had still been relatively warm from the evening before. Matt, even though he wanted to have a look at the map to plan out the day's proceedings, was reluctant to open the door, guessing that the incoming blast of cold air would probably wake his friend. In any case he was more than happy to sit back with his cup of tea, and to delve into the book he had been currently reading. Ironically it was a story about a hitchhiking trip made by a couple of friends. A lot of it brought back memories to Matt, who had done more than his fair share of hitchhiking over the years, some of that

actually along with Sandy. In fact, reading that tale, and remembering his past experiences, made him realise just how much better it all was travelling around in a van. Even if the van was a bit of a train wreck, it still afforded a lot more creature comforts than just living out of a backpack ever could.

'What time is it? Where are we? Did we finally find that cabin the ranger told us about?'

'Well, good morning there. It's late, very late. I was just about to check whether you had fallen into a coma. Luckily there's a very pretty cemetery nearby, so it wouldn't have been all bad.'

Sandy sat up yawning, and stretching his arms.

'Man, did I need that. What a good sleep!'

'Did you hear the storm last night?'

'A storm? Really? No, I slept the sleep of the just.'

'It was actually pretty wild up until the wee hours, although it looks like we might be in for a nice day today. The sun's out.'

Sandy looked with interest at the cup in Matt's hand.

'Any chance of a cup of tea?'

'Yup, I've got the water boiling.'

Matt grabbed a mug, threw in a tea bag, and poured in some hot water from the billy, which had been simmering away on the edge of the stove. Sandy jumped down from the bunk, and sat down at the small table, just as Matt placed the tea in front of him.

'Thanks, man. Have we got any biscuits?'

'About that. What say we head into town, and have a decent breakfast? Probably we'll be having lunch in the wild somewhere, so why don't we do breakie in style?'

'Yeah, OK. Nice one. Actually I'm a bit hungover, so a decent feed would probably do me the world of good.'

'Brilliant. Let's sort out everything here, pay the man, and shoot up in the van. We need to put in some gas, and pick up a few veggies as well. You can probably guess what for.'

'Bring it on brother, bring it all on, but only after I've finished my cuppa. This is going down really well. Have I ever told you that you make a bloody half decent cup of tea?'

'Thank you, kind sir, always a pleasure.'

After having finished their cups of tea, they had made all necessary arrangements for their departure, and then headed back up to the main drag. The tearoom they had found was nothing special. They had tried, in vain, to find a

bakery with freshly baked pies, but apparently that trend hadn't hit the coastal town of Hokitika as yet. Neither it turned out had filter coffee, so with their sausages and eggs on toast they had had to settle for tea. With great dismay for the both of them they discovered that the brand of tea they were served with wasn't even as good as the one they had with them in the van. To a certain extent they felt slightly cheated, but at least the rest of the breakfast had been well prepared. After having tucked in heartily, and making short work of polishing off all that had been on their plates, they were both full, and in good spirits, ready to face whatever the new day would bring. Matt passed the map over to Sandy, folded to the relevant part of the country they were in. He pointed to where they were.

'It looks like the road follows the coast up to that national park, which might be a good place for lunch, and a bit of a look around. Then it cuts inland all the way up to Nelson.'

'Brilliant, let's take it slow. I really love the coast down here. It has a real wild beauty about it. A special sort of ruggedness.'

'Yeah, it's pretty famous for that. With us Kiwis, anyway.'

'OK, let's pick up some veggies, fill her up, and hit the road. It's gonna be a good one today. I can feel it in my bones.'

Matt laughed, as he stood up.

'I think you might be right.'

The road north delivered spectacular views of the sea, which, notwithstanding the pleasant sunny day which had come out, was pretty rough, with monstrous waves rolling in, and crashing violently onto the desolate sandy beaches. After only a short period the road then briefly curved inland. Ahead of them was a junction. Sandy excitedly pointed at the road sign.

'Hey look! If we go straight on we would head back to Christchurch.'

Matt, however, swung the van around the corner, going to the left.

'That, my friend, is the road which cuts right across the middle of the South Island, coast to coast. Unfortunately for us, even though it is indeed of great and wondrous beauty, this van will never be in any condition to traverse it. Even if we had a first gear.'

'Not even with me pushing?'

They both laughed.

'Well, I hadn't considered that. That could be a game changer. Maybe we should give it a try? Shall I turn back?'

'Nah, I've eaten too much to be bothered pushing you and your bloody van. Anyway, how come I got put in charge of pushing?'

'I tossed a coin, remember? You lost.'

'You know, I don't actually remember that.'

'Oh yeah, that's right. I did that before going to pick you up. Anyway, same result.'

'Just lucky for you I have a particularly strong upper body.'

Matt looked across at his friend's thin physique, and shook his head in wonder.

'Oh yes, I'm lucky there alright.'

The van crossed a very sturdy concrete bridge, typical of the solidly built bridges they had seen all along their journey, and passed through some flat farm lands. They swung around a curve in the road, and came upon a classic country situation. One that you would only come across in the slow-paced lifestyle of the West Coast. Cows were filing out of a paddock on the left of the road, and were walking along the road in the direction that they were also travelling. Matt slowed the van to a halt, and the two mates jumped out to take in the scene, in all its other-world magnificent charm.

'Welcome to New Zealand, Sandy. Where else would you come across something like this?'

They both laughed.

'Yeah, I've never seen anything like this before.' laughed Sandy.

'Actually it's a bit of a first for me too. Not much of that goes on up in Auckland. Up there traffic jams are altogether another thing. Not too many cows involved.'

Bringing up the rear of the line of cows was a farmer, who, together with a couple of dogs running around, was keeping all the cows on the righteous path. The farmer casually waved to them, as if it was just another day. The two of them casually waved back, as if it was just another day for them as well. They absolutely loved it. To them it reflected the ways of life of a bygone era. By the time the cows had moved into the appropriate paddock, there was only another car waiting behind them, and just one car waiting at the other end. No one had been particularly inconvenienced. No harm had been done. The boys really enjoyed the slow pace of life in the area. Matt waved the other car past, then they got back in the van, and happily continued on their way. Sandy had been absolutely blown away by the whole experience.

'It's probably a pretty nice way to live, don't you think, Matt?'

'Are you kidding me? No freshly baked pies, no filter coffee. How on earth could anyone live like that?'

Sandy grinned, and flung his head back.

'Of course, how stupid of me.'

The road diverted around Greymouth, and continued inland for ten, or so, kilometres, before finding its way back to the coast. A further half hour's drive and they found themselves just where they wanted to be. They were in the lush, green growth of yet another National Park, with many creeks and small rivers flowing down through the valleys to cross over. To their right were the foothills leading up to the great Southern Alps, the mountain range that cuts through most of the middle of the South Island, and to their left there were beautiful sandy beaches interspersed with rugged outcrops of rocks, jutting out aggressively into the sea. They crossed yet another bridge, and came up to a place that looked just right for them to stop at. It was a magnificent bay, with a sandy beach framed at each end by two rocky outcrops. Sandy pointed a little further along the road.

'That looks like a pretty good place to stop, don't you think?'

Matt slowed the van, and pulled onto the side of the road. It wasn't really much of a parking space, but it allowed them to move off the road, and would therefore easily let other traffic pass. To the left of them they could see a short track through the brush to the sandy beach. They were obviously not the first to park there.

'Sandy, let's have a look around, then we'll get lunch on. What do you say?'

'I say lead on, and I shall follow.'

They both walked the short way through the scrub to find themselves in a little piece of heaven. The sandy part of the bay was probably only about 150 metres long, in a semi-circular shape, with, at each end of the beach, harsh rocky outcrops jutting out into the sea with ferocious determination. As was not unusual on their travels, they were completely alone there. The beauty of the spot was absolutely captivating. The sun reflecting off the sea only added to that beauty.

'I am definitely going in that water. This is just too nice.' said Matt.

'It looks cold, and those waves are not small, but it really is tempting. What do you reckon the temperature is?'

'Dude, the sun's out, the water looks fucking incredible. Who cares about anything else. I'm getting my towel.'

Matt turned to head back to the van. Sandy called after him:

'Togs, or no togs?'

Matt only laughed in reply.

'Well, I think it's time for me to get my feet wet, as well. Count me in.'

Sandy followed Matt back to the van. They delved into the deep recesses of the van. Towels in hand they returned to the beach. Matt turned to his friend.

'Listen Sandy, there is only one way to do this. Strip off, and run like hell into the water. The softly softly approach won't cut it here. You'll never get in.'

Matt stripped himself off, threw his clothes on the sand next to his towel, and ran as fast as he could into the cold water, screaming loudly as he ran. Sandy, whilst still slightly hesitant, decided that it was time to throw caution to the wind, and to follow his friend's example. After stripping off he ran straight into the shallow water, then dived under an incoming wave. The intense cold cut through him, but the overall sensation was one of total euphoria. He swam a bit to try and warm up. Within seconds the cold was biting into his naked body, almost taking his breath away. He stopped swimming, and looked to see where his friend was. He couldn't see him anywhere. Panicking slightly, he turned to the beach to see Matt towelling himself off. He, too, made his way back to the beach. His body was almost numb with cold as he grabbed his towel. His hands were shaking so much with the cold he had great difficulty drying himself.

'Are you a convert, Sandy?'

'Man, that was insane! What a buzz! You didn't last long, ya bugger.'

'Short and sweet, brother. That's the way.'

After they were once more fully dressed, they both sat on the beach under the rays of the warming sun.

'I was looking at the map, Matt. From here on in we cut inland. What do you think about this? After we leave here we make a run straight up to Nelson.'

Matt nodded in agreement.

'Yeah, not a bad idea. We've pretty much seen the best the south has to offer, and my funds are definitely running low. Let's have lunch, and shoot straight through.'

For a few minutes they both sat there staring out at the ineffable beauty before them. After a while Matt stood up.

'I'll get the fire going.'

'I'll get the veggies ready.'

Thus began yet another rendition of the well-rehearsed ballet of the Mulligory Sacrament. By that point it was such a well-polished symphony that it almost appeared to have taken a page out of the 'New York Philharmonic', or, at the very least, it was comparable to a seamless performance from the cook at 'Phil's Cook and Grill'. Barely had the allegorical symphonic music stopped when the two of them found themselves seated on a tree trunk that had been washed up by a previous storm, tucking into their delectable delight.

'This has got to be one of the finest views of any restaurant I've ever been to. Don't you reckon, Matt?'

Matt briefly stopped shovelling the Mulligory Wonder into his mouth, and surveyed the scene.

'Yeah, it most certainly is. Hey, maybe this place needs a burger bar, too?'

They both laughed.

'Don't start that shit again. You know, there's actually something a bit serious that I would like to run by you.'

Matt could tell by Sandy's oddly sober tone that what he was about to discuss was really something of great importance to him. He turned to him and spoke in a reassuring way.

'Of course, mate. What's up?'

'Well,' started Sandy somewhat hesitantly, 'it turns out that I'm gay.'

Matt burst out laughing.

'You're kidding, right? The number one sleazebag around women is gay?'

Sandy, obviously fairly reassured about Matt's positive reaction to the substance of the news retorted:

'Let's get into that part later. What about my... my confession. What do you think?'

'Hey, listen man, nothing changes for me. You're still the same guy you were five minutes ago. You are, and will always be, one of my best mates. You are who you are. It's no big deal. We all have our own path to find, and follow. As long as we don't harm others on that path, who cares? But, explain this constant attention to any female who crosses your path. What's that shit all about?'

Sandy smiled contentedly.

'Well, first off, thanks for taking it all as I was hoping you would. I was really sure it wouldn't be a big deal for you. Although, actually saying the words out loud isn't easy. Not at all. As far as my supposed womanising goes, well, yeah, I guess I fell into that kind of behaviour to sort of throw people of the scent. You know, the alpha male out hunting, etc. Coming out is a bit of a frightening scenario.'

Matt, who had been attentively following his friend's explanation, nodded his head.

'I can really understand that. To be honest it's not a bad strategy. Most people are pretty closed-minded. Have you ever actually gone out openly gay?'

'Yeah, I've made a few tentative steps by going to some gay bars in Sydney. Even though it's a big city I was always a bit scared I would be seen by someone I know.'

'My advice? A small town like Nelson would not be the place to be openly gay in. Small town New Zealand is not like Sydney, or any other big city.'

'You were saying that Wellington is not far from Nelson. Do you think I could make a bit of a break out there?'

Matt looked at Sandy, and nodded his head.

'Good thinking. Wellington is nowhere near as big as Sydney, but it is a city, and also, you wouldn't have to worry, because no one knows you there. I definitely think that could work for you.'

Sandy felt a great sense of serenity. He had never previously broached the subject with anyone, but he had known that if he could rely on anyone to understand him, it would have been Matt.

'You're a good mate, Matt. Thanks.'

'Hey, no sweat. Come on, then muggins. Let's clean up these dishes, and get moving. Our future awaits.'

With the practised ease of great experience they quickly sorted out their domestic chores, said their spiritual goodbyes to the place that had given them such an enjoyable, albeit temporary, stay, and cranked up their trustworthy work horse. Matt took one last look back at the beach.

'You're right, you know Sandy. That really would be the perfect setting for a restaurant. Maybe we should float the idea to Felicity?'

'I hate to be a downer, but who's gonna put up the money? And where are the clients gonna come from?'

'Yeah. You know something? You really are a fucking downer.'

Shortly after getting back on the gilded path, the road left the beauty of the sea views, and cut sharply inland. The road wasn't without its hills, but for the most part it followed a series of valleys through, and around, the foothills. They were constantly turning corners along the windy road. Away to their right they could almost always see the snow-clad mountains of the hinterland.

'I thought it would have been a bit harder going through here, Matt, but it's actually not that bad.'

'Yeah, me too. Hey, can you smell a bit more smoke than usual?'

The motor in the Commer van was essentially right under, and in between the two front seats, covered by a metal casing with rubber clips on either side. They had both become used to the noise of the motor, and the modest ever present smell of burning oil.

'No, not really. It seems about the same.'

'When we are settled we will definitely take a run out to the Abel Tasman park, and do a trail there along to a cabin.'

Sandy laughed.

'With or without a ranger's advice?'

Matt joined him in the laughter.

'This time we will look for one who hasn't blown his mind on steroids.'

'Maybe we could ask one to accompany us along the trail, just to be sure.'

Matt continued laughing.

'Yeah, I'm pretty sure they do offer that service. Hey, part ranger, part baby sitter. For a bit extra they actually hold your hand.'

Sandy sniffed the air cautiously.

'Actually, you're right about the smoke, it is getting worse.'

Matt wound his window down a bit, even though the air coming in was pretty cool.

'In truth, I'm even a bit surprised that the old beast has made it this far. I was half expecting to have to dump it somewhere along the way, and just finish the trip hitching.'

Sandy cracked his window a bit, too.

'It's been a bloody godsend. So much better getting around in a van than hitching. It's definitely one of the best trips I've ever made. She's done us well, the old girl.'

As the kilometres passed the smoke continued to increase in the cabin. It was pretty apparent to both of them that something was amiss. Quite probably the motor was on its last legs. Matt pulled over.

'Hey, let's open the back door a bit, so the smoke can get out.'

He went around the back of the van, and opened the double doors.

'OK, so what can we do here?'

Sandy looked back, and offered some advice.

'What about putting the food box in between the doors, and then tying them to the handle of the side door?' suggested Sandy.

'I like it. Hey, throw me over that rope under my seat.'

Sandy reached under the driver's seat, grabbed the length of rope, which he tossed back to Matt.

'Thanks, man.'

Matt fiddled around with various different possibilities, until he managed to sort out a workable solution. In the end the tied-up back doors were open just a bit, only about 30 centimetres, but enough for the ever increasing smoke to find its way out of the van. Matt jumped back in, and they set off again.

'Assuming the van will...' started Sandy.

Matt cut him off, abruptly.

'Assuming? Hey don't give up on her yet. It's just a bit of smoke, man.'

They both laughed.

'OK, well, WHEN the van gets us to Nelson, what will you do about it? It would cost a fortune to fix it.'

'Shit yeah, that's true. I'm not sure. I'll have to think about that one. Hey, you know what? I could look around some wreckers' yards for a van that had had an accident to the rear part, or something like that, one with a good motor and gear box. Those places usually sell them pretty cheaply.'

'Bit of a coin toss, don't you think? You would have no idea how good the motor is, and definitely no guarantee.'

'Well, any motor is gonna be better than this one. Without even talking about the gearbox. No, I think I'll give it a shot. First I'll need some money, though. What about this for an idea? When we hit Nelson we park up in a camping ground, one with bus access to the town, and just use the van to sleep in, without driving it around too much, just until we get on our feet?'

'Sounds good to me. Do you think we'll be able to find jobs easily?'

Sandy hadn't really looked for a job in Dunedin, and was fairly unsure of the requirements of the labour market. Matt was an eternal optimist.

'I don't see why not. A couple of good looking blokes like us.'

Sandy wound his window down a little bit further.

'Man, that smoke is really starting to bite.'

By that stage smoke was pouring out of the obviously not well sealed engine hatch. Luckily with the open back doors it mostly went straight back, but it meant they had to drive with the windows partially open. With the early dusk starting to set in, the air which was entering was getting colder, and colder.

'Hey, it can't be far now, Sandy. At least, I hope not.'

The kilometres passed slowly, the smoke situation was getting to the point where the two of them had their heads close to their respective windows, to be able to breath in smoke-free air. Smoke-free, but biting cold air. By that time darkness had set in.

'Hey, Matt, how about a break? This is killing me.'

'Yeah, me too. I'll try and find a spot to pull over.'

At that moment they were driving up a slight hill, and Matt didn't want to stop at a spot from where they may not be able to start off again. As they reached the top of the hill he came across a suitable spot to pull in. It wasn't much of a parking area, but it left the road free for passing traffic.

'Look, Matt.'

Sandy was pointing towards the horizon. There was an area of fuzzy lights surrounded by darkness.

'Well I'll be buggered. Come on, let's have a look. Leave ya door open.'

They both jumped out. Matt opened the side door, and loosened the binds on the back doors, to fully open them as well. After finishing setting up the van to free it from the accumulated smoke he joined Sandy, who was sitting on a big rock mass just a bit further along the road.

'Is that what I think it is, Matt?'

'It sure as hell is, mate. Journey's end. The new frontier.'

'It looks good. I already like it.'

Matt sat down next to his friend.

'Hey, you know what, Sandy? Why don't we leave our grand entrance until the morning? That way we will have the light of day to find our way around, and sort things out a bit easier. I would guess that we are only 40 to 50 k's out, so it won't take long in the morning to get into town.'

'With you on that, man. Plus I'm totally smoked out. How about I make us a lovely cup of tea?'

'That would definitely go down well.'

Sandy left Matt sitting there, and went back towards the van. Matt looked down at the distant glow. On the one hand he felt excitement about the challenges he would face arriving in a new town, but on the other hand the failures of Christchurch were returning to haunt him, as he thought about having to dive into it all again. During the trip he had been able to put a temporary mental block on all those thoughts, but with the end of the journey within view, they were resurfacing. They couldn't be put off any more. He needed a game plan. He decided that he would have no fear, and would jump back into the game. The only difference being that he would take things slower, not get too far ahead of himself. Probably he had been overly ambitious before. It was time for a more calculated approach, although he had absolutely no doubts that he was on the right track, as concerning the field of work he wanted to get into. He just needed to slow things down, and learn from his previous mistakes.

'Here you go, piping hot.'

Matt took the offered mug.

'Lovely. Thanks, man.'

Sandy sat down next to him.

'It's been a fucking great road trip, Matt. Without a doubt the best I've ever had.'

'Yeah, for me too. And you didn't even have to push the van much. Not that you'd have known that, with all your fucking moaning.'

'Aren't you forgetting a little detail? The Haast-fucking-Pass.'

'That's just a rugby expression.'

The two of them laughed together. Matt pointed down to the horizon.

'So Sandy, off to the right of Nelson there is that wine making area I was telling you about. That's where they make that wine you liked so much back in Dunedin, or Christchurch, or wherever it was. Also over that way is where the ferry leaves for Wellington. Before getting out into open waters it winds its way around some really beautiful islands. It's a fantastic trip across. Definitely a must do, even just on a day trip, or, as you said, for a weekend away.'

'Yeah, it could definitely be a good spot for me to open up a bit. Would you come over with me for a weekend away, sort of as my back-up?'

'Why not? I could do well in the gay bars.'

Sandy looked at him, and laughed.

'Obviously I wouldn't expect you to come with me to the gay clubs.'

'They sell booze, don't they?'

'Well, yes, there is that.'

'Plus, any stray women would be easily picked off in that crowd.'

Sandy couldn't stop laughing.

'I think you may not have fully understood the concept of a gay bar. From what I've seen in Sydney there won't be too many birds. But, they do, as you say, sell booze, so...'

'So there you go. Booze and boys. What more could you want?'

By that point Sandy was almost laughing hysterically.

'Well, you did convert me to your strange eating habits, so maybe I can return the favour.'

Matt slapped his thigh.

'I fucking knew it. Deep down you always disliked the Mulligory.'

The laughter continued unabated.

'Anyway, Sandy, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, over there to the left of the town is where that great National Park is. We will definitely be going out there, quite possibly on more than one occasion. And I know for a fact that the trails in that park are well marked, so there won't be a repeat performance of all that other bullshit with Mr Steroids. All in all, Nelson is the centre of a pretty interesting part of the world. When we get settled we will have plenty of places to look around.'

'I already love the place. You know, looking down at those lights, I'm positive that somewhere in there we will find just the right spot for us.'

'Tomorrow, dear fellow, the population of Nelson will be increasing by two.'

The friends slipped into silence as they sat there sipping on their cups of tea while they viewed the distant lights, each lost in his own thoughts. The realisation had come to both of them that, even though they still had to make the

last short run into Nelson, to all intents and purposes the road trip was over. A new phase was opening up right in front of them. Right down there somewhere in the middle of those faraway lights they would need to carve out a place for themselves. Both were clearly aware that there would be an initial stage of sorting out all the minor necessary evils, like finding work, and setting up a more permanent type of housing, but that didn't bother them. They felt that they were both more than capable of sorting out those trifling details. Then, once they were established, that would be when the real fun part would start. They wanted to shape, to incisively sculpt, a new exhilarating lifestyle for themselves somewhere in the midst of that lit-up horizon. With the unbounded optimism that infused the two of them, neither had any doubts about their success in that venture. Sitting up there in their lofty vantage point, feeling like Gods looking down on creation, it felt to them that the distant lights of Nelson would be a sort of gateway for them. A gateway to life.



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