


Buried secrets never truly
stay buried in the outback

A man and a woman are embracing in a field. The man is wearing a black t-shirt and blue jeans, and the woman is wearing a black t-shirt and blue jeans. They are both looking towards the camera. The background is a cloudy sky.

Written
IN
DUST

THE ELSIE CREEK SERIES



MEL A ROWE

WRITTEN
IN
DUST

MEL A ROWE

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***Caveat: As a courtesy, since there may be some sparse language choices in this story that may represent an obstacle for the reader, I am offering this warning. Please note this language and cultural references are purely for fictional purposes only and not designed to offend any individual persons, culture, or religions implied.*

The Following Is Written in Australian English

I consider the ELSIE CREEK SERIES a love letter to the unique individuals that continue to shape the Northern Territory into a truly amazing part of Australia.

My dad would've loved it.

O

It was one of the most spectacular electrical storms Rowan Peddler had seen in years. Would it be his last?

The lightning shoot across the sky with skeleton-like fingers that stabbed at the dark clouds, to then spark and explode, brightening the skies. The whipping wind carried the scents of outback dust and rain. It led the rumbling thunder to roll like a dozen road trains, only to detonate with a flash of twenty hand grenades.

He winced as a flashback bit at his mind, of a place with walls of rain and humid air as thick as soup. A place of mosquitos and gun fire.

'It's just a storm.' Rowan stood on shaky feet, wiping sweaty palms on jeans that had seen better days.

With a rattly breath, he gazed over his front steps, shaded by the deep verandah. It was his favourite spot in this two-storey house, part of the infamous Peddler Property, that creaked loudly of his loneliness.

He sniffed at the air as more lightning arced across the

sky. It was one big storm front and his house was in the middle of it.

He rolled his shoulders, unable to ease the tight sensation digging deep into his spine, staring into the darkness, highlighted by lightning flashes.

Nothing was out there, just the outback.

And that storm.

He reached for his tobacco pouch, sitting on a small table beside a bottle of bourbon and a glass. The highly polished wood stock of his loaded shotgun reflected the lightning, where it rested against the wall beside his favourite chair.

He flicked open the soft leather pouch, rolled his smoke and lit it in one well-practised move.

Only for his lungs to squeeze a ring of fire.

He slammed his hand against the dark house as he coughed and coughed, heaving for air. He had to hang on. He had to make it. For her.

Finally, the coughing subsided enough for him to take shaky breaths, scowling at the smouldering cigarette in the ashtray.

It was the waiting that was the worst. The guilt was crippling him, knowing she'd hate him for it, but he had to tell her. He had to right his wrongs.

Collapsing back into his cane chair, which moulded perfectly to his frame, his long legs crossed at the ankles, he sipped on his bourbon and waited for the squeeze in his lungs to subside.

As he watched the storm towering over a wide flat

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land, his limbs grew heavy, and his eyes closed, he hoped for a sleep free from nightmares.

Suddenly ripped from his sleep, forced to sit back in his chair, his arms were thrust against his body. 'What the—

'Morning, Peddler. Napping on the job, again?'

Rowan's head pounded, his throat rough, his tongue furry. He grimaced at the ropes wrapped around his arms, strapping him to the chair, still on the front porch where the hallway light streamed through the screen door.

He never turned on the lights, not while he was on watch.

Damn, he fell asleep on the job. This illness was killing him on all levels, when he used to be able to hear the soft footfalls of a bronze quoll crossing the outback dust, except now someone could sneak right up on him and tie him up, no less.

He gave up straining against his bindings.

It was over.

This was it.

'So, you finally fronted, huh?' Rowan narrowed his eyes at the tall man in dark camouflage military cargos. Kempsey. 'You still look the same, just skinnier. Still got that barbie-doll blond mop.'

'Hides the grey.' Kempsey tousled gloved fingers through his hair. 'Due for a cut. I see you're still sporting that number one.'

'Hides the grey.' They shared a grin.

Rowan paused. 'Why are you here?'

'You knew I was coming.' Kempsey sat at the small table, cranking open Rowan's shotgun to remove the live shells. 'So where is it?'

Rowan sniffed at the pre-dawn air, crisp from the storm that was more puff than power. Still, the sprinkle of rain was enough to settle the outback dust. 'It's gone. All gone.'

'Bull, it is.'

'Do I look like I'm living like a king of the outback?'

Kempsey rummaged in his top pocket to remove a packet of cigarettes, lighting a coffin nail before pouring himself a bourbon.

How dare that prick make himself at home, sitting back to face the dawn, which was nothing but a fine ribbon of light on the distant horizon. The sky was full of stars, so deep they floated like coral dust in an endless sea of silent witnesses keeping the secrets of men.

'Get it over with,' snapped Rowan, 'or give me a damned cigarette.'

Kempsey chuckled. 'Sure.'

Rowan leaned against the ropes biting into his chest, but he damn well needed this, using his teeth to snag the cigarette.

A flick of the lighter, and Rowan took a long drag.
Damn.

The smoke never made it down his lungs before he was hacking all over the place.

He coughed and coughed, heaving for air. Wiping the spittle on his shoulder, leaving a trail of bright crimson

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blood staining his shirt. He hated that. Especially when he had a cloth in his pocket.

'You should quit smoking if that's what it does to you.' Kempsey held out a shot of bourbon to Rowan.

'So they tell me.' Rowan swallowed deep, letting the heat of the liquor douse the fire in his chest while washing away the metallic taste of blood.

He scowled at the cigarette lying on the verandah's floorboards. Reaching out with his boot, he soon gave up when he couldn't stretch far enough.

Kempsey plucked the cigarette from the floor, dusting it before holding it out to Rowan. 'You still—'

'Yeah, I'm dead anyway.' The coffin nail hung from his lips as he tried to distract himself from his itchy chin. 'Am I the last one?'

'Yep.'

'So, why are you here?' Rowan took a smaller drag of his smoke, forcing down the urge to cough.

'You know why.'

'Not a mind reader, mate. But I heard Smithy died of a heart attack and Tolser died in a boat accident. All by natural causes. You're getting good at it these days.'

'What gave me away?'

'Tolser was afraid of water. So for that man to drown first, then Smithy ...'

'Smithy did that to himself. His panic attack turned into a heart attack, right in front of me.' Kempsey shook his head, exhaling a stream of smoke. 'He never could control his nerves, not after that trip.'

'Yeah.' Both men sighed, staring at the dawn inching higher in the sky.

'Tolser didn't have it,' said Kempsey, 'cried like a baby trying to sell me his wife and kids. Smithy didn't have it either. None of them did. So, it must be you. You had the box.'

'A block. I didn't know it was a box that opened. It was Tolser who passed it to me in the first place, mate, so I reckon Tolser had it and sold it. How else did he make his millions?' Rowan scowled bitterly back at the house. 'And me. Living here on my military pension in the old family home that's falling down around me. Do you honestly believe if I had the stupid thing, I'd still be sitting here?' Rowan spat out his smoke and watched it roll down the porch steps. Taking a shaky breath filled with fiery rage, as the first tweet of the birds' morning song began.

'Well, I've got a theory ...' Kempsey stepped off the porch, dropped his smoke alongside Rowan's, barely squashing them into the dirt with his boot.

Rowan hated leaving rubbish lying around, especially cigarette butts. 'Didn't give yourself a headache thinking up this theory, did ya?'

Kempsey grinned, his teeth as white as his hair. 'I reckon you've got it stashed somewhere. Holding onto it for a rainy day.'

'Rainy day, mate!' Rowan's bitter laugh echoed around the verandah. 'If I did, I would've sold it and spent it on my last hurrah before the big C has me bedridden. I'd get the penthouse in some ritzy five-star hotel, gorge myself on

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food, wine, and women, to gamble the lot away.'

'About ten years ago, I would've believed it.'

Rowan shrugged against the ropes. He deserved this for what he'd done.

He cleared his throat, his voice wavering as he said, 'I'm hoping you'll do the same for me. A bloke can't live like this. Not when all I've got to look forward to is getting my tucker through a tube, and bed sores from being too crook to move except stare at a ceiling.' He looked up at the dimming stars, a ceiling that was alive.

'Are you sure? Haven't you got any family left?'

'It's just me. I'm the last of the Peddlers.' Rowan heaved in air, craving another cigarette and a bourbon chaser. 'Just don't mess up my face. I always wanted an open casket to scare the townspeople away. Not that there'll be anyone at my funeral.'

'Sure, mate, sure ...' Kempsey's boots never made a sound as he stood in front of Rowan. 'Do you think they'll let a prick like you into heaven? Or are we both destined for hell?'

'Dunno? But I'll find out shortly.' It's a question he'd been asking a lot lately. It's why he'd been racing against time to make things right. But had he done enough?

'Why not tell me where it is now, so I don't tear your place apart?'

'Haven't seen it. Haven't got it. Always thought Tolser had it and sold it.' Rowan sighed at the soft salmon pink sky, inhaling the crisp scent of the fresh outback dawn. 'It's sure going to be a pretty day ...'

1

Detective Sergeant Marcus Moore stood in the shade of the front porch, watching the sapphire sky turn red from the churning dust caused by an incoming car.

It parked behind the ambulance, which stood among the scattered police cars, shaded by the two-storey farmhouse. Home of the infamous Peddlers.

'Hey, Marcus.' Dr Stewart Mannen Junior grabbed his medical pack and slung it over his shoulder.

'Stewart. Thanks for coming.'

'Rowan Peddler was a patient. Who found him?'

'Two-dollar Darryl and his nephew, Chopper.'
Marcus nodded at the two Aboriginal men leaning their backs against a flatbed truck on the far edge of the bush. Chopper was just a kid, who obviously wasn't taking it so well, while Two-dollar Darryl scrunched his wide-brimmed hat in his hands.

'Did they say what happened?'

Marcus pointed at the cane table and chair set by the front door. 'They found Rowan sitting in that chair, thinking

he was napping. He didn't sleep in the house, apparently, just napped.'

'Rowan told me he was an insomniac.'

'Anyway, they gave him a nudge on the shoulder to wake him up and he fell.' Marcus and his crew had taken photos and scoured the area for clues, but the rain had washed away all tracks, except for Two-dollar Darryl and Chopper's truck.

'Won't they come inside?' Stewart nodded at the Indigenous men by the truck.

'Nope. Not until the place gets smoked ...' It was a big house that was too quiet. To die alone like that, the thought made Marcus' stomach squeeze.

'What do you think happened?' Stewart gently peeled back the sheet to lean over the body.

'There were no signs of a struggle, but there's an empty bottle of bourbon, half-smoked cigarettes, a loaded shotgun, and a tonne of empty pill packets.' It looked like a suicide, textbook style. Yet something wasn't right. 'Those pills have your name on them and that's a lot of medication, Doctor. High-end opiates at that.' If they were in the city those pills would sell for a fortune to druggies on various street corners. Marcus wasn't having that kind of market in this town. 'How many meds did you give him?'

'A bit. Rowan came in for a cough he couldn't shake and wanted some cough mixture to get rid of it, only to discover he had terminal lung cancer. He should've been carrying an oxygen tank, not cigarettes.' Stewart read the medication labels.

'That's no good.' Marcus adjusted his cap. Rowan Peddler was a quiet man who'd kept out of Marcus's way—considering what the Peddlers did for a living.

'It was only last week that I told Rowan he had about six weeks to three months to live.'

Marcus rubbed at the back of his neck. Even if Rowan Peddler lived notoriously on the wrong side of the law, it was a horrible way for anyone to learn of news like that. To die alone was sad, and so slowly like that even worse. It was far better to go out in a shootout—you didn't have to think about it then.

Stewart stripped off his gloves. 'Has he got any next of kin?'

'Don't you have that in your medical records?'

'Rowan said he was the last of the Peddlers. Told me to call Two-dollar Darryl if there was an issue. But that's his employee?'

'You could say that.' Marcus narrowed his eyes across the ochre dust to where Two-dollar Darryl and Chopper waited. But there'd be no record of anyone ever having been paid to work for the Peddlers.

Senior Constable Porter strolled through the front door. 'I wonder if the town's hermit has a will?'

'There'd have to be one,' said Stewart. 'Rowan told me this land's been in his family for generations.'

'The Peddlers have been around a while.' Marcus hooked thumbs into his police belt. 'Porter, give Otis a call and see if he has any details of a next of kin for Rowan Peddler. Stewart, can we send Mr Peddler to the morgue?'

The poor man had been outside too long already.

Stewart nodded.

'The cause of death is?' Marcus asked, waving over the waiting ambulance officers.

'Can't say until I complete the autopsy. I'd better grab the rest of his medications from the house.'

'I was going to suggest that.' Marcus led the way. 'What do you know about Rowan Peddler, from his doctor visits?'

'Ex-military guy who took his pension and came back to look after his mother, like someone else I know.'

Marcus shrugged. 'Anything else?'

'Rowan struck me as a smart man, but very private.' Stewart paused, with eyes widening. 'What happened in here?'

Inside the farmhouse the staircase stretched ahead to the upper levels. To the right stood the large office. On the left it opened to the living room where furniture was tossed in all directions with stuffing strewn everywhere like fake spider webs at Halloween. Pictures were off the wall, tables knocked over, and bookcases emptied.

'On first impression, it looks like Rowan, or someone else, was looking for something. But with his medical condition ...' Marcus wasn't so sure this was a criminal investigation.

'Terminal patients have been known to have fits of rage when first dealing with their imminent death. But Rowan was neatly dressed, had his boots polished and he was rather tight-lipped or spoke in riddles.'

'How did Rowan react when you told him he only had a short time to live?' News like that sent chills to scurry across his broad shoulders.

'Nothing. The man showed no emotion. I told him to keep his meds in the fridge because of the heat.' But to get to the kitchen they had to get past the pile of books scattered across the floor, all from the same author. Stewart picked up a book. 'Look at all these romance novels.'

Marcus smirked. 'How do you know it's a romance?'

'Jenny's got these novels at the nurses' station. She shares them with the nurses and patients, and you should hear them *swoon*.' Stewart chuckled. 'They do this rating on the male hero of each book, kind of like our dating-ratings game.'

'Hmph.' Marcus scooped up a paperback. 'Do women really go for this?' He'd never bothered with romance, because he never had time for women who wanted relationships. Work was his life.

'Ooh, look, it's the complete collection.' Tanisha squealed, pushing back her police cap to eagerly snatch up the books.

'How do you know?' Marcus asked Tanisha, who rarely left the station. Yet Tanisha had been the first out the door to see inside the Peddlers' house. A house no one had been allowed to visit in decades.

'I read.' Tanisha flicked through the pages, only to squeal again. 'Oh my word, they're autographed.'

Marcus flipped open the paperback to find a delicate handwritten note:

**Rowan, I hope you'll enjoy this book.
Maybe learning how to romance a woman might help you lose
your bachelor tag!
All my love TT.**

'He knew Taylor Timms?' Tanisha's eyes were so wide and bright, Marcus braced himself for another squeal. 'Wait until the girls hear about that.'

Marcus dumped the book onto the nearest empty shelf. He didn't have time to read fiction, only crime reports, the latest in police investigation technology, and the pile of paperwork waiting at the office.

'Oh-oh-oh, he's got *Lambert's Gold*! Squeel!' Tanisha hugged the book. 'I've been trying to get a copy of this for *centuries*. This book's worth hundreds. No, it's probably worth thousands!'

Marcus rolled his eyes at the big-hearted Tanisha with her flair for dramatics.

Porter scooped up a paperback from the floor. 'Tess reads these.'

'So she should, they're the best romantic adventures *ever*.' Tanisha squeezed the book against her generous chest, as if holding a precious child. 'Can I take this, Sarge? Pretty please.'

'No.' Marcus tugged the book free from Tanisha's hands and tossed it onto the bench.

Tanisha's face fell in absolute horror.

'Get to work, you lot. Tanisha, you can head back to the station to man the phones.'

'But someone should stay behind to guard these books, Sarge.' Tanisha again reached for *Lambert's Gold*. 'I'll do it. No over-time, Sarge. You can count on me.'

Marcus grumbled. 'Since when do we guard books at a crime scene?' Technically this may not even be a crime scene, if the poor man died of ill health.

'Tanisha might be right, Marcus,' piped in Porter, flicking through a paperback. 'If word gets out they're here, I reckon Tess's grandmother will close up the craft shop and make Tess come hunt them down.'

Marcus rubbed at his eyes. *This was not happening.*

'If any of these books go missing, and I find out who the thief is, I'll throw the book at them.' Marcus snatched the book out of Tanisha's hands again and haphazardly threw it at the bookshelf to prove his point.

Days like this, he missed big city policing. Instead, he was stuck in this small town, dealing with staff who were more like a group of girl guides!

Nothing too exciting ever happened in this town.

Well, not since his best mate Connor came back, and they had that bomb scare at the school a few weeks back.

That school scene was history now, because the outback rumour mill would be churning at full speed, spinning the story of how the small town hermit of the notorious Peddler family scored a collection of romance novels and died.

2

'Oh, for the love of vodka! I can't believe we're in the middle of the outback. It's the middle of nowhere!' Felix's shrill voice bounced off the interior of the car. 'And they have cows. Real cows! I'm expecting someone to start milking one any minute now. And those toilets at that last roadhouse must be where cleaning products go to die.' Felix snatched up the hand sanitizer from his man bag and rubbed on the clear liquid.

'You didn't have to come with me.' Wren gripped the steering wheel, following the highway's dotted line.

They'd been driving alongside a train line for hours, chasing down the road's white line that disappeared in the curve on the horizon. It was the only sign of civilisation among this arid countryside of olive-green and silver-leafed scrubby trees punching through the ochre dirt, pinned by a towering blue sky. The enormity of the surrounding outback made them seem so small. What's worse, they hadn't seen another vehicle for hours.

'Listen, Toots, I will not leave you alone in this time of

need. You need me, whether you like it or not.'

'I would've been fine.' She was used to roaming solo.

'Now you might be, but later ...' Felix wagged his finger at her. 'I'll be there to hold your hand. To pick you up when you fall, and to make coffee in the morning. I'm here to protect you from who-knows-what is out here in the middle of nowhere.'

'You? Protect me?' Wren smiled. Her first smile in days. 'The queen who squealed from the roadhouse toilet because of an incy-wincy spider.'

'It was horrid! That spider was huge. You could put a saddle on it to ride out on the filth of the place,' Felix said with wide eyes. 'I'm not like you, Toots. I don't do rugged adventures into the wilderness that involve hazardous outback loos or fighting off man-eating spiders. I'll die if I see any snakes. Just die.'

Wren's smile grew into a wide grin, almost feeling an urge to laugh. She was glad Felix had barged his way into this car, refusing to leave. 'Did you pack the coffee?'

'I packed that first, my hand lotions second. Who knows what they'll have here—wherever here is?' Felix tossed his thumb at the wide, flat countryside. 'It's a shame you wouldn't let me bring the coffee machine. It wouldn't have taken up much room.'

She glanced to the backseat, crowded with matching suitcases. 'I brought two bags. You, my glamour queen, brought eight.'

'Hello, I didn't know what I was packing for. I believe in being prepared.'

‘You could have stayed in Sydney.’

‘Toots, we never get to spend any quality time together, what with us both being so busy with life. And this is what best friends do — support each other.’

‘I appreciate it.’ Even if guilt was killing her for not being here sooner; she couldn’t be late, not now. Wren rolled her shoulders. She’d been on edge ever since she’d heard the news that began the race to get here.

But for Felix to leave his home, that was huge. It still surprised her that Felix had crammed all his luggage into the car without an invite. ‘Why did you insist on coming?’

‘I needed a break. A time out.’

‘The club?’

He squeezed a dab of moisturising cream on his hands and rubbed it in working on the nails, cuticles, then through to the back of his hands. ‘The club. Reggie. Everything. Even if I’m so out of my comfort zone in— where are we again?’

‘Northern Territory.’

‘It’s big ... And empty.’ They stared out the window as the road rolled ahead. ‘Why did you decide to come out here?’

‘I promised Rowan I would. I was originally going to be here a few weeks from now, just ...’ This was nothing like they’d planned.

‘How come you never told me about this guy?’

‘I did.’

‘You told me he was your male advisor.’

‘He is—was.’ Wren gripped the steering wheel

tighter.

'I know you prefer flying solo and rarely get close to people, but this guy must mean a lot for you to catch a boat, a helicopter, two decent planes, and one tiny god-knows-how-that-thing-flew for an aeroplane. Crossing countless time zones and oceans just to get here.' Then he breathed.

'We're not there yet.' Again, she checked her gold watch. The days all seemed to roll into one, ever since the phone call that seemed like a century ago. But in three days—well, four considering the time zones, she was here. 'I don't want to be late; I owe it to the guy.'

She grabbed the map for the hundredth time, driving along the one and only highway that cut through the Northern Territory while checking the route. Surely, they couldn't get lost, could they? Ha, it was pretty much the story of her life, getting lost to find a story.

'*We have a sign!*' Felix's voice bounced around the compact car's interior as he pointed to the road ahead. 'Please tell me it's civilisation?'

The tall sign said:

WELCOME TO ELSIE CREEK

Wren leaned closer to the steering wheel. Beyond the small rise in the road, shining like a single solar panel in the sun, was the small town of Elsie Creek.

They were here.

A siren blasted the air as blue and red lights flashed behind them from a slick police car. It moved fast,

considering her own speed.

'Where did that cop come from?' Wren slowed down. 'Felix, you're supposed to be keeping a lookout.'

'Don't blame me for your speeding. They really must hide behind the bushes out here, because I didn't see that car.'

'Dammit.' She hit the steering wheel as she pulled to the side of the road. 'We're going to be late!'

'Calm down, Toots. You don't want to get arrested. People go missing out here and get chopped up into meat pies or—'

'Felix, enough!' Wren scowled at her side mirror, because she hadn't been able to look at her rear-view mirror ever since Felix claimed the passenger seat.

'Hubba-hubba.' Felix fanned his face while staring at the rear-view mirror.

'I can't believe you said hubba-hubba.'

'Blame it on all this outback dust I'm sniffing, but that ...' Felix pointed at the officer coming alongside, '... is one heavenly hot tamale.'

As the electric window rolled down, she had to recoil from the ferocious wave of scorching heat that rose from the tarmac. It was potent.

'Licence and registration, please,' requested the policeman.

'Well, hello there, Officer.' Felix waved his fingers in the air as if playing an imaginary piano.

Wren dug around in her bag and pulled out her international driver's licence and the rental car details. After

handing them over she sat drumming her fingers on the steering wheel. She didn't have time for this.

'Any reason for the speed, Miss Sumney?' The officer riffled through her paperwork.

Wren removed her sunglasses and faced the officer. He was huge, broad shouldered, with a police cap and dark sunglasses. She couldn't see much more than that because the sun was in her eyes.

'A funeral.' She knew she'd done wrong, so why not cop it sweet from the cop. 'Look, I'm sorry I was speeding, I just don't want to be late.'

'Whose funeral?'

'Rowan Peddler's.'

'That's not on until two o'clock.'

'It's one-thirty now and I don't know how far it is to get there.' She frowned at her watch, ticking away every precious second.

'No, it's only twelve-thirty.'

'It can't be. I changed my watch when we landed at the airport.'

'You're probably jet lagged and mucked up the times, Toots. You should've let me drive and navigate with that map thingy.'

Wren whipped around to face Felix. 'You haven't driven a car since you got your licence. And you don't know how to read a map unless it involves a floor plan of the Dolce & Gabbana spring collection.'

'I have too driven since I got my licence.' Felix lifted his chin. 'Once. It was that drag queen's pink Cadillac.'

'In the deserted car park next to your club.'

'You wouldn't know what day it is without me.'

'I do too. Today's the funeral!' She slammed her hand on the steering wheel.

'*Okay, you two, cut it out!*' The police officer's voice was powerful and full of authority, snapping them into silence. 'Out of the car.' He opened the driver's door. 'You both need to cool off.'

'Well, that's a bit ironic ...' mumbled Wren, getting out of the car, feeling the full brunt of the outback heat. Were they going to get arrested? And what was it that Felix had said about getting chopped up into meat pies?

3

'Tourists who aren't used to driving long hours need to take a break and stretch their legs. Otherwise, they get hypnotised by that white line on the road, suffer with fatigue and cause an accident.' Marcus had attended way too many accidents caused by road fatigue.

Marcus marched the pair of tourists to the space between their rental car and his police car. 'Stay right there.'

He went back to his car, scooped out the ticket book. Glancing back, he watched the pair dressed in black fancy city clothes, like funeral clothes.

But the woman.

The *woman* ...

Wren Sumney was a stunning mirage on a deserted outback highway. He had to be dreaming.

In a black dress that perfectly outlined every smooth curve of her body. And man, that lady had curves that went on forever. Her blonde hair in a twist, with a few loose curls surrounding her fine face. But her eyes. Damn.

It'd been a long time since he'd seen a woman like

that. Especially out here.

And for a man who was used to surprises as part of his job, nothing could have prepared him for this.

Breathe, buddy, she's just a ticket.

'Are you going to arrest us?'

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