

DAY ONE

Tuesday, July 28, 1942

LUCY Boyle never felt more lovely than the night she died.

'A real looker'. That's what they said anyway. She'd have been a knockout in Sydney or Melbourne, maybe even, as she dreamed, in Hollywood. But there, in possibly the most isolated place on Earth, she was just the most stunning thing for a thousand miles.

But her movie star looks belied a soul as dark and unforgiving as a miner's curse. Wiluna! How she hated the place. The heat, the dust, the stink, the noise... *everything*. At just sixteen, Lucy Boyle knew she would do anything, try anything, and use anyone to get away from that place. And, in the end, Lucy Boyle got her wish. She left Wiluna that night in 1942. It just wasn't quite the way she'd planned.

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CRACKER Wilkins was a 'hopeless case'. A washed-up drunk, he had not a friend in the world, none. In fact he even loathed *himself*.

He might have had an interesting face once, before acne and desert winds had sandpapered most of it away. Cheeks hollow, eyes yolk-coloured behind the pair of ill-fitting horn-rimmed spectacles he'd scrounged off the Road Board tip, Cracker was particularly poor in the teeth department and so they didn't chatter as he sat waiting. But he shivered even though the night was still warm. With trembling hands, he drew an old dressing-gown around his spindly frame like a puppy seeking warmth from its mother. A real bastard of a headache had started to hack its way through his skull like a madman wielding a machete.

Cracker 'liked a drink' as they also said in the understated way of

the Australian Outback. In fact, he'd drink just about anything; *kerosene* if he had to. He stank too, like a dead bungarra. A magician in this regard, no matter how often he washed he was always surrounded by a funk so severe that even the most trail-hardened stockman or abo who had the misfortune to cross his path would gag and quickly hurry away.

It was almost dark by the dead lake, the spectacular sunset over Lake Violet all but lost on Cracker. Sunsets, Cracker reckoned, like most things in life generally, could go fuck themselves for all he cared. You couldn't drown your sorrows in a sunset after all. Several sheets of what looked like dry lightning momentarily lit the sky. *Thunderstorm?* Cracker wondered. Rain wasn't *likely*, but then the weather had been totally fucked up all year hadn't it? Far off he heard a soft 'plopping' sound, like someone pulling a cork out of a bottle. *Wishful thinking*, he chastised himself.

Cracker Wilkins wasn't happy. How much longer did he have to wait here anyway? *Give it five minutes*, he decided. *Yep, if he don't show in five then fuck 'im. Prick can keep the money, take his fucking odd-jobs and shove them up his fuckin' tattooed arse. Five minutes. That's it. Decision made.* However, more than twenty minutes later, Cracker hadn't moved an inch.

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ANTICIPATION stippled Lucy's skin despite the lingering heat. The sun's radiance leaked inexorably from the sky, but its shimmering ovoid plunge seemed to crush the only tree on the horizon. Soon the heat would go and the cold of night would come. Tomorrow, she knew, she would wake freezing and, by noon, it would be so hot it would be impossible to breathe.

What a Godforsaken fucking place this was! With a strangled cry, a bush raven burst from the spinifex, wings whooshing and Lucy gasped in surprise. *Jesus H fucking Christ on a fucking stick, what next*, she moaned inwardly.

Once the bird was gone, her breathing gradually returned to normal, the night silent save for the distant throbbing of mining machinery half a mile away near the camp. It keened, a sound like the moan of a shackled ghost in the night. *Jesus*, Lucy implored the night as she caught her breath, *just let me get out of this fucking town*. With a start she realised she had bitten her tongue in fright, she could taste the coppery salt of her own blood. *Where was he anyway?* A moment of panic swamped her. *The bastard!* Surely he wouldn't forget? She stamped a foot churlishly, a ridiculous thing to do she knew, but she couldn't help it.

There was a sudden susurrant noise close by. *Snake?* Lucy groaned. Long-dead tumbleweeds and dead desert grasses crackled as a figure staggered forward, shell grit and basalt crunching under its boots. For the merest second Lucy felt her alarm rekindled and then she relaxed. *It was him.* Everything would work out fine. He stopped on the black, salty sand a few yards away from her.

'Did you bring it?' She demanded, the voice of an ice queen again.

'Said I would, didn't I?' He seemed angry. Shit.

'No need to get shirty,' Lucy placated him, no point in getting him further offside. 'C'mon, let's get on with it then.'

Lucy undid the buttons of her white uniform. As she did so she purred: 'Help me with these?' It was really all so easy wasn't it? She never ceased to be amazed at the way men seemed to lose whatever will they had around her.

He stood behind her then. She was very beautiful, there wasn't a man in Wiluna who wouldn't give his right arm to be out with her alone like this. She could feel his breath on her shoulder, they were so alone; no one ever came out here anymore. He undid the buttons at her shoulder as she requested and the white uniform slithered to the ground catching the last of the light like the shed skin of an albino snake.

Naked now, Lucy was perfectly silhouetted against the impossibly beautiful sunset. So clever, so beautiful. Big dreams and everything to live for. But five minutes later Lucy Boyle would be dead.

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'MISS me?' Carl Black vaulted into the ditch beside Cracker Wilkins.

He was a huge New Zealander who worked out in the town gym a lot. Though he was white, not a Maori, his muscular upper-body was covered in tattoos. He was good looking too, in the way some film-stars are, with high cheekbones and full, sensuous lips. But somehow Black had missed 'handsome' by a whisker... mainly because of his eyes. Flat, grey and emotionless, they were normally concealed by a pair of mirrored aviator sunglasses. But not tonight.

'I've been waitin' 'ere a bloody hour,' Cracker moaned, hating the way his voice betrayed him, how it sounded so whiny, like an abandoned kitten mewling. He waited for some vitriolic come-back but, instead, the big man reached into his greatcoat. Cracker flinched, fearing a knife or a gun. *A greatcoat? In this weather?* But Black didn't pull a weapon, instead something sloshed in the semi-darkness. Cracker all but choked on an involuntary rush of saliva. A cork popped and, sure enough, the bouquet of cheap whisky made Cracker's gut tighten. For a horrifying moment he thought he might vomit.

Black brought the bottle to his lips and took a solid swig. 'Ahhh...' the big man cooed in appreciation. *Son of a bitch!* Cracker howled internally. But then the big man surprised him again. 'Here,' Black shook the bottle at Cracker. 'You c'n hiv the rist...' Black's Kiwi accent and the way his voice seemed half an octave too high for his rugged looks amused Cracker but he knew better than to rag him about it. He might not be the full quid but then Cracker wasn't *that* stupid either. There was a sort of rat cunning about him.

What's this? Cracker felt goose pimples on his neck as he eyed the booze. Black wasn't exactly the generous type, what was he up to? Cracker waited for some cruel snatch-away that didn't come.

'C'mon... drink up,' Black shook the bottle again, encouragingly, like a dog's owner might shake a stick. *Fetch Cracker, fetch.* 'I gotta stay sharp for tomorra. Got gym at six.' *Jum ut sux,* it sounded like. But it no longer sounded at all humourous.

Cracker snatched the bottle with a shaky hand. *Fuck it,* he decided. Even so, he sniffed the contents tentatively because the big Kiwi wasn't above poisoning him. Come to think of it Cracker mused, he hadn't actually *seen* the big bloke take a swig had he? But if the bastard wanted to kill him he could do so in a hundred ways. And most of them would have been a lot easier than poisoning him. With a shrug Cracker took a long, hard, swallow and prayed for the best.

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'CALMED down?' Black's breathing was steady now and he'd rolled himself a cigarette; Cracker watched it flare as the big man smoked. The scorched sandalwood scent of a charcoal burner's camp wafted in on the desert breeze.

'We're gonna' hut the Bug Mine.' Black told the darkness.

Cracker's heart skipped several beats: *The Big Mine?* He didn't like the sound of that. *Fuck Jesus with a pitchfork!* He took a furtive swig of whisky and watched Black cart-wheel his half-smoked fag into the desert with a nonchalant flick. Cracker pulled his tattered dressing-gown together but the threadbare garment seemed to have lost any comfort at may have had.

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'SO, I need ya to steal me a truck,' Black finished up. 'A reliable one... with a full petrol tank (*pitrol tink*)...'

'Why me?' Cracker whined. 'You can do that y'self.'

Black sighed like a teacher with a particularly retarded pupil. For the thousandth time he wondered if involving Cracker in this was a