

Is love worth stealing home for?

*Diamond*

IN THE

DUST

THE ELSIE CREEK SERIES

MEL A ROWE

DIAMOND IN THE DUST by [Mel A ROWE.](#)

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**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.

# ONE

Over teeth-chattering corrugations and rocks, Verily navigated the small scooter through the treacherous terrain. Her smile grew, as the wind whipped her sun-bleached hair free from the edges of the bike helmet. It was as if she was the only person alive in this place. Inhaling clean air, zipping along the red-dirt road that contrasted with the biggest of blue skies.

Cattle, with wide handle-bar sized horns, grazed in the wide-open paddock. Across the road, rows of barren mango trees followed the curve of the land belonging to Verily's aunt.

Suddenly, the ground shook and vibrated through her seat like an earth tremor as a low earthy rumble grew to a roar behind her. Her eyes widened at the reflection in her side mirror and her heart jumped to her throat as fear spiked to an all-time high.

A devil's dust storm of explosive, churning red soil spewed high into the air. Its cause was a mountain of metal that led the tornado, and

it was the biggest truck Verily had ever seen—charging straight for her.

*If I can get through my Aunt's front gates, I'll be safe.* Verily twisted the throttle, forcing the bike to go faster, she was trapped between two barbed wire fences that shone under the afternoon that could seriously damage skin.

The dust demon barrelled toward her. The ground shook, and the noise was horrendous.

'NOOOOO!' Her scream was lost in the deafening roar as trailers taller than houses passed by, one after the other, after the other.

The more she tried to ride through the storm, the more it dragged her along with the truck—straight for those towering tyres.

She hit the brakes. The bike skidded, her ears rung, and the train on wheels engulfed her in an apocalyptic world of red rain and thunder.

Buckets of gritty red powder showered over her, filling her ears and nose, crunching grit in her teeth, while her tongue was like sandpaper. It was suffocating.

Then, like a summer's monsoon, the walls of red dust fell, and the cloud moved away.

'*What the hell?*' Verily spat out dirt, wiping at her gritty eyes. She was completely covered, rolled, and basted in a coat of red grit.

She scowled at the mobile storm that slowed down with a hiss of its brakes. It then turned right—straight into her Aunt's place, tumbling past the main house, then down the track and disappearing into the mango orchard.

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*How does a truck that big, just vanish?*

It wasn't any of her business, Verily was only the visitor. She was always the visitor.

Rolling her left shoulder, ignoring the dull ache, she gunned the dust-spluttering bike and slowly rolled back to Molly's, hoping to blow away the dust she wore. It was everywhere.

She steered through the thick fallen layers of dirt that had erased all other tracks on the road, it was like riding on freshly fallen snow. Everything in this place was new ground, ever since she'd returned to this country. It was a land she had once called home, yet she felt like an alien. A red dust covered alien.

Why did she come here at all? There were far better places to holiday than being stuck in the middle of the outback.

\* \* \*

Alex steered over fifty metres of moveable metal to the centre of the mango orchard and parked the prime mover behind his cottage. It snaked around the building, shielding it from the rows of trees as the smell of cattle wafted from the empty trailers.

On the veranda, he tossed his Akubra on the hook by the back door, ripped off his long-sleeved shirt and chucked it straight into the washing machine. He dusted down his jeans by the laundry tub, and

splashed water to rid the dust and dirt from his face and hair. There was no time for a shower, so the pommy powder shower would have to do, and he let the deodorant can do its worst.

He snatched a fresh shirt from the clothesline that stretched across his veranda, he took a mouthful of milk from the old beer fridge, then sighed at the sight of the bottled beer calling to his taste buds. 'Soon fellas, soon.'

He held up a labelless bottle to the afternoon light. There was minimal sediment with a promising clarity to the pale ale. Would this be his winning brew?

He spotted the clock on the wall. 'Crap, I'm late.'

Shoving the t-shirt over his head, he snatched his duffel-bag from the old armchair. Small dust clouds stirred beneath his boots as he headed for his ute and followed the dirt track that ran through the mango orchard, to Molly's house. Their stout trunks and sturdy branches were naked and ready for fruit bearing. Alex was looking forward to their flowering, hoping his new pruning technique would work on the next crop. A crop that would pay for his dream future.

He pulled up to Molly's stone house with its deep verandas, where he'd spent many an afternoon. The place was his second home.

In through the back door and into the large open kitchen, he grabbed the water cooler from Molly's pantry. Its shelves were stacked with jams and preservatives, and where the bickie tin called his name.

With a sweet biscuit in his mouth, Alex filled the water bottles at the sink. 'Hey, Molly, you ready?'



No answer.

He chomped on his biscuit as his boot-steps echoed along the wooden floorboards. 'Molly, you about?'

Voices carried down the corridor as he stepped through the doorway and stopped. His eyes widened, his jaw dropped, and his head tilted.

And his heart stopped, but only for a second...

Then it hammered.

Fast.

Mouth dry, it was impossible to swallow the tasteless biscuit as he stared at the heavenly vision at the end of the hallway. Long, messy sun-bleached hair. Sleepy eyes the colour of raw umber. The rest was athletically toned perfection in matching bra and bootylicious-briefs where the word sexy just wasn't a big enough word in his vocab to define the perfection.

'WHAT THE HELL!' She screamed at him, covering herself with her arms, and dashing into the spare bedroom.

He gave a slow lopsided grin as his eyes followed that great arse through the doorway, then found himself frowning at the mash of red, angry scars that ran down her left shoulder and upper arm.

The door slammed, snapping him back to reality.

'Um, sorry,' he mumbled to the closed door. *Not really*. It'd been the best perve he'd had all bloody year. 'Oi, Molly? Did you finally find your magic potion and turn young again?'

'I wish,' replied Molly, coming out of her room at the far end of

the corridor.

‘You always look the same, except for the hair.’ That changed colours and styles all the time, but Molly’s warm smile never changed. ‘So, ah. Who’s...’ — *the goddess behind door number one?* He pointed to the closed door.

‘Verily. Remember? I told you my niece was visiting.’

‘Wasn’t she supposed to be here last week?’

‘She got hung up. Talk about being late...’ Molly tapped on the closed door and sung out, ‘We’ll be waiting outside, Verily.’

‘Won’t be a sec, Aunt Molly,’ came the muffled reply from behind the door.

‘Aunt Molly, huh?’ Alex leaned his broad shoulder against the wall. ‘It’s been a long time since I’ve heard anyone call you that.’

‘I’ve only got one niece,’ said Molly, walking past him. ‘Are you coming?’

He’d rather wait for the mystical creature to come out from behind that shut door. ‘Ah, yeah.’ He followed Molly and grabbed the esky and water coolers off the table.

Flicking through her vast umbrella collection from the rack he’d made her way back in school, Molly plucked a blue one that matched her dress. ‘Now, do me a favour, Alex. Don’t tell Verily where we’re going or what we’re doing.’

‘Why? It’s not like it’s a secret. The whole town knows about it.’

Entering the kitchen in a pair of sweatpants that hung low on her hips, Verily threw her hair into a ponytail and asked, ‘The whole town

knows what?’

*That a goddess had moved into town.* She looked like someone who’d just jumped out of bed, but sexier.

‘Nothing,’ said Molly, pushing open the creaking flyscreen door. ‘Come along, hon, we’re late.’

‘Sorry, I had to take a shower because some idiot in this massive truck covered me in dust. I nearly got sucked under the tyres,’ Verily said, following them outside.

‘Ah crap,’ mumbled Alex, and headed for the safety of his ute.

‘Then,’ continued Verily, ‘that monster tore down your driveway and disappeared into the mango orchard. How does a truck that big disappear?’

‘Sorry, Molly,’ said Alex, wincing at Molly raising her eyebrow at him. ‘I didn’t want to be late.’

‘That was you?’ Verily narrowed her eyes at him from the other side of the rear tray. ‘You— whoever the hell you are—almost sucked me under those tyres. I almost suffocated in all that dust.’

‘Were you walking, hon?’ Molly asked Verily.

‘No, I was having a great ride on your scooter, until I swallowed enough sand to make my own Bondi Beach.’

‘No need to be so dramatic,’ said Alex, shaking his head. ‘I thought you were some kid who’d pinched that bike, the way you were wobbling.’

‘I was learning! It’s not easy riding in that powdery red dirt.’

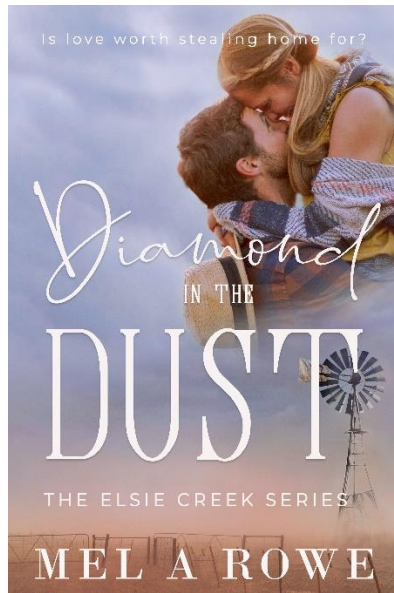
‘It’s called bulldust.’ *Typical tourist.* ‘Most people pull over to let

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a road train pass on dirt tracks, but you were trying to outrun me.  
Weren't you?'

Her dainty chin lifted and her lips tightened. She was mad at him—but those bedroom eyes of hers were damned sexy.

He grinned for a moment, then matched princess-drama's frown. 'Welcome to the Territory, Princess, where red dust is part of everyone's daily diet in the dry season. Get used to it—' *Or leave.*



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