

derailing the recipe for love

*Caked*  
IN  
DUST

THE ELSIE CREEK SERIES

MEL A ROWE



DIAMOND IN THE DUST

# CAKED IN DUST

MEL A ROWE

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First Printing by R&R Ramblings House 2020

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E-Book ISBN: 978-0-6487892-0-8

Print ISBN: 978-0-6487892-1-5

*\*\*Caveat: As a courtesy, there may be some sparse language choices in this story that may represent an obstacle for the reader and I am offering this warning. Please note this language is 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.

# ONE

**C**hasing down a water buffalo before breakfast was not how Lucy had pictured the start of her day. Sipping a coffee to watch the stunning sunrise would've been better than this.

'Come on, Cecil, you can't pluck the weeds today.' She kicked at a stone, stepping over the metal railway line that sliced through the outback's centre and disappeared into the never-wherever of Northern Australia.

She patted the large rump of the pygmy buffalo as he sniffed at a bunch of limp lotus flowers lying before a pair of white-painted crosses. A slight breeze carried the scents of dust, cattle, the warmth of summer, and the echo of children singing.

Cecil raised his big head as goose bumps squirmed along Lucy's spine and they both stopped to search for the childlike singing floating in the darkness.

Her eye caught the train station's kitchen lights streaming through the open doorway where music played inside. Music her boss would never approve of.

'Look, Cecil, I've got a beautiful bunch of flowers with your name on it, smuggled fresh from the pub's kitchen, just for you. Don't tell them or I might lose my other job.' She held out a posy of sad daisies that made the buffalo's eyes shine.

'Where's your crazy chook friend? Not awake yet?' Again, she peered into the shadows, this time searching for the menacing red-feathered fowl who had a habit of attacking people. No wonder their town's softball coach was threatening to turn it into a Sunday roast.

Wild birds stirred with their morning song, as the pink haze of dawn chased the violet night sky. It led the chorus of slow murmurs from hundreds of brahman cattle contained within the station's fenced yards. But no red hen.

And she had yet to coax its furry partner in crime off the tracks.

'If you care to follow me, good sir, I have your standard train day reservation of breakfast with a view.'

A white daisy hung from the lips of the beast as he chewed on the posy, while Lucy untangled the ribbons wrapped around his wide horns. Cecil's black coat was covered in a mash of coloured chalk. No doubt the kids at the small bush school had drawn all over him.

At the rear of the Tea House that made up part of the Elsie Creek train station, Lucy safely secured Cecil into his pen with fresh food and water.

She grabbed her two-wheeled trolley filled with milk crates, dragging it behind her. She passed the packed cattle yards, up to the back shed with its dim glowing globe covered in a swirl of bugs performing their strange tornado dance. It barely gave enough light for her to steer around the outstretched swags holding snoring stockmen spread across the veranda.

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The nearby car park held four massive road trains, taller than houses, their empty trailers snaked behind them. They overshadowed the assorted utes that held more sleeping stockmen in their back trays.

It was so typical for train days.

Lucy pushed on the small shed's sliding door. Its ear-splitting squeal made her flinch, stopping the chorus of snorers. 'Sorry,' she muttered in reply to the men's grumbles and groans.

Flicking on the light, she dragged her trolley inside as more stockmen stirred from their swags, sliding on their wide-brimmed Akubra's before slipping on their boots. They stretched, dusted themselves off, and with toothbrushes and towels they swaggered towards the rainwater tank.

Lucy checked on the urn resting beside the trays of mugs next to the tea and coffee jars. From her trolley, she pulled out the large plastic containers, removed their lids allowing the aromas to escape into the shed's air, still warm from the oven. She was proud she hadn't burned this morning's batch of hearty bacon and egg muffins, thick slices of buttery banana bread, and the crowd's favourite of Anzac biscuits to slip into their pockets for later. It wasn't much, but the men never complained.

'Morning, Miss,' said the stockman, tapping the brim of his sweat-stained hat.

'Morning.' He was handsome, yet familiar to her. Even though they all looked the same with their deep suntanned faces and collared shirts stiff with sweat and dust. Wide-brimmed hats shaded their eyes as they wiped away the sleep with work-hardened hands.

'How's your dad?' He asked, making himself a cuppa as the scuffle of many boots started a line behind him.

'Good.' Lucy shrugged, dishing out her food while wracking her brain over who this guy was.

'Where's you dad these days?'

'Out back of Mataranka.'

'Say G'day to him for me?'

'Sure.' *Whoever you are?* Why was he talking to her? No one talked to her—especially cute stockmen. 'Um, I'd better go open the kitchen.'

'Shame they won't let us mob eat in there, then you wouldn't have to cart this lot down here.'

'I don't mind. Besides, it's Nancy's place, Nancy's rules.' Nasty Nancy refused anything with dust, coffee, or cattle inside her traditional Tea House—which excluded all things male.

'If any of you care to donate to the cuppa cause...' She held her breath placing the empty coffee tin onto the bench. This honour system worked well so she didn't have to hang around. 'Please don't take the mugs with you or I'll cop an earful from Nancy complaining about stockmen stealing her crockery.'

'No worries, Miss. We wouldn't want the Station Hand's daughter getting into trouble.'

Again, she wracked her brain at how she knew the guy, but was too shy to ask.

'Your dad would skin us alive with his stock whips to make himself a new pair of boots for himself, if we mucked up your day, Miss,' said another stockman, sliding a bunch of gold coins into the tin before grabbing a mug.

'And then some,' mumbled the cute stockman, taking a bite of his muffin. 'But these are the best.' He pulled some bills from his dust-stained denim pockets and popped them into the tin. 'Please give Nancy our compliments on her cooking.'

'Erm, sure.' Unlike Lucy, Nancy had the sparkly reputation as the cake queen of scones and sponges in this town.

But Nancy never cooked for these men.



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Dragging her trolley back to the kitchen, baking aromas lingered in the air. A new playlist from her housemate livened up the atmosphere as she entered the dining room.

One of the ancient ceiling fans groaned and rattled as it wound up like an unbalanced aeroplane propeller. She frowned at its irritating squeak with each rotation of its wide blades. Would it survive the day?

Lucy opened the glass bifold doors hoping to remove any scents of her baking business. They wouldn't be open for long before the heat, cattle dust, and flies would stir with the rising sun to drive everyone crazy.

Yet, with hints of frangipani and wild jasmine growing in the nearby local park, it disguised the corralled cattle, making it sweetest this time of the morning at the station. It matched the sky's pink hazy highlights in the lengthening clouds that stretched across an infinite horizon.

With a watering can in one hand, and a wrapped muffin and coffee mug in the other, she headed for the station's main platform.

The only bench seat, with a plaque for some long-forgotten reason, was now a part-time shelter for Homeless-Hank.

'Hank. Hank.' Lucy poked at his shoulder as he lay asleep across the bench.

'What?'

'Have some brekkie. Come on, you don't want the Station Master—or worse, Nancy, catching you.'

Hank sat up, his wild hair and beard as woolly as a bushman who'd been out scrub for far too long.

'Ta,' Hank croaked out. His shaky hands gripped the mug as he slurped his coffee. 'Train day, huh?'

'Yep.' She watered the thirsty potted palms, then grabbed the broom and swept what she could to at least last the morning rush.

Lucy brushed the fine layer of grit from her cheek as the humidity climbed higher, making her dress stick to clammy skin. Fine floating red

dust particles fell over every uncovered surface. Sweat trickled along her hairline as she gazed at the tease of heavily pregnant clouds in the distance.

It hadn't rained in months. And like everyone else in the Northern Territory, she hoped today would be the day it rained. Really rained. Not some sprinkling shower—Lucy wanted walls of water!

'What time is the train due?' Hank asked between mouthfuls. His hand steadier as he sipped from the mug.

A light came on at the Station Master's house highlighting the Stock Inspector's vehicle parked out front, catching both their attentions.

'In an hour,' she said.

'They've got a lot of cattle out back.'

'I reckon it's the last big run of the musters, before the wet.'

'I know nothing about cattle, but all I smell is cattle.' He screwed up his nose.

'You get used to it. And the dust. And the heat. And the flies—no, you never get used to the flies.' It's what she hated the most about this time of year, the small sticky black flies.

A set of car lights flashed from the town's main street and crossed the train tracks, its squeaking suspension a dead giveaway.

'Hank, she's here.'

'Bugger. Where's Cecil?'

'In the pen.'

'Good.' Hank bundled up his tattered hessian sack that tinkled with tins and other metals. 'I'll leave your cup by the back door. Best batch of muffins you've made yet,' he said, screwing up the napkin and tossing it into the rubbish bin.

Her smile broke wide. 'I'll sneak you a refill later.'

'Coffee?' Hank asked, jumping down from the platform and onto the tracks to hide in the shadows.

'Sure, if Nancy doesn't see me.'

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'Have you got anything stronger?'

'Not today.' She'd never hesitated to feed him, but never his addiction.

'Bugger,' Hank mumbled, lazily loping along the train tracks.

Lucy returned her watering can to its home by the Tea House's open doors. Thankfully, the fan had stopped squeaking and was doing its best to stir the soupy air in the dining room.

She cast a picky eye over the wooden tables and chairs set for the many regular bookings. Handmade lace doilies rested on the antique sideboards holding an assortment of fine bone china teacups with matching saucers. Silver cutlery glinted off the lights beside silver serving trays. It suited the black and white images of the many women that lined the walls made of corrugated iron and river stone.

It was quiet now, but soon it would be full of chattering customers.

A car door slammed behind her.

'Close them flamin' doors, will ya. We don't want the flies and heat in there,' hollered Nancy, waddling up the steps carrying her large cane basket. 'Gawd, the cattle are strong this morning.'

'I hadn't noticed,' replied Lucy, closing the bifold doors.

'Nah, you wouldn't.' Nancy stood in the centre of the room, her hands resting on generous hips. Her grey eyes sparkled amongst the many crinkles as she inspected the empty tables. 'Right, I've got flowers for the tables.' She pulled out a bunch of white orchids, ferns, and some pink honeycomb gingers, their heady aroma wove its way around the room. 'Where's that pesky water buffalo?'

'He's in the pen.'

'I should be charging Esther for babysitting that rogue beast of hers.'

*Babysit?* Nancy did nothing for Cecil. 'Isn't Esther your friend?'

'And that's the only reason I put up with it, or I'd have one of them ringers out back shoot him for tucker.'

'None of them would dare.'

'Why? Because you say so, missy?'

'Erm, no.' Lucy lowered her head, hiding her hands in her apron. She was a nobody.

'He's an oversized pain in the posterior, is what he is. Why Esther had to have a flamin' pet buffalo is beyond me. She could've had a dog, or a bird like the rest of 'em. But no. Typical Esther, she's always gotta be different.' Nancy grumbled as she scuffed her slippers across the floorboards towards the kitchen. She grabbed a starched apron and tied it around her waist, opened the large industrial oven door and sniffed at its barren cavity. 'Have you been baking again?'

'I was practising.'

'How come it doesn't smell burnt?'

'I didn't burn anything.'

'That'd be a first! And, it'd better not be meat? Not in my flamin' cake oven, you don't,' Nancy said, sifting flour into a large mixing bowl. 'Tell me why the flamin' heck you're here so early?' She shook her head causing floppy jowls to shift in unison. 'And why you stay in this town is beyond me. Your housemate is never home... You should do what she does and—'

'Become a bush-pilot?'

'Mmm...'

Nancy took a pinch of salt and sprinkled it over her flour mix, then dusted her hands. 'It might be safer for you and everyone else if you stick to the ground. You know, it's not too late to hitch a ride on the next road train back to your dad. There's better places than this to call home, you know. There's an entire world out there.' Nancy cracked five eggs into a separate bowl, then lightly whisked them. With a wooden spoon, she folded the rest of the ingredients within the large mixing bowl. 'Gawd, I hope none of them flamin' stinky stockmen think they can come in here today?'

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'They'll be fine.' She watched Nancy scoop out a cup of sugar, hoping to guess the measurements of Nancy's secret sponge or scone recipes. Lucy had tried to replicate it, but she'd burned her batches. Every. Single. Time.

'Good. I'm glad that Station Master's got that coffee club in the back shed. It stops that mob from dragging their stench and dust in here.'

'They work hard.' Lucy's father was a stockman, and she was protective of them all.

'And what the heck am I payin' you for? To stand and gawk at me all flamin' day. Now, get a shimmy-on, missy, that dining room needs prepping before the train gets here.' Nancy then scowled at the ceiling. 'Turn that rap-crap off will ya, this isn't some cheap nightclub! This is a respectable Tea House and we'll have none of that.'

'Yes, Nancy.' The skirt on Lucy's dress swung as she swivelled on her boots to face an empty dining room that would soon be full. She loved train days.

\* \* \*

The train shifted and Jax's head banged against the window. He winced, cracking open an eyelid to peer through the smeared glass. They'd been chasing the same storm cloud for most of the night. Not that there was much to look at, but now, as he sat up, it was dawn.

Outside was a flat, sprawling space of nothing. It was like he'd landed on the moon. The trees were spindly and sparsely scattered amongst an endless sprawl of red dirt.

Jax scratched at the bristles on his chin and checked his mobile phone but it was useless. Aeroplanes had better Wi-Fi than this train, where he'd lost signal less than ten minutes out of Alice Springs.

Still, he'd never trekked this far north, earning himself another tick off the brotherly bucket list.

Sipping his warm bottled water, he narrowed his focus on the tiny white lights in the distance that appeared to be floating just above the sea of red dirt.

Was that the fabled Min Min lights?

As the train sliced through the outback, buildings rose from the sunburnt soils to form the township of Elsie Creek.

Sitting taller, he searched for a decent vantage point amongst the smeared glass. The town appeared like a speck surrounded by a whole lot of nothing.

What the hell was he doing out here?

The dividing door opened, the roar of the engine competed with the rattle of the wheels spinning on the track, it filled the carriage as they hurtled closer to town. The train's engineer slammed the door shut behind him. 'Hey, Jax, we're coming up to Elsie Creek.'

'Thanks, Mike.' They'd shared coffee on the few platforms they'd stopped at overnight. Mike had even given Jax a tour of the train and the driver had allowed him to steer, making him feel like he was twelve-years-old again.

His brother would have loved this—and it was another tick off that list.

Mike wrestled with the windows to allow the morning's hot air to fill the cabin. 'We'll unload your gear and the town's freight first. Hopefully, there'll be enough room for your vehicle to park with their stockman's ute muster they've got going on.'

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‘The what?’ Jax stretched out, stiff from sitting too long on the hard seats. He’d only slept out of boredom.

‘The stockmen are here to load the cattle. They camp at the station, then when we leave, they’ll cross the tracks to visit the pub. I swear their utes are like a mobile home to that lot.’

‘Yeah, right?’ Jax did own a decked-out ute, but he wouldn’t call it home.

The train started to slow down as it approached the station. A smoke-machine-like fog curled over the empty wet highway that ran alongside them. ‘What is that? Mist?’

‘Steam. It’s a sauna out there, mate. Reckon you’ll get used to it?’

‘That’s a lot of steam.’ Streams of white steam curled off the wet road like water sizzling in a frying pan. Jax’s t-shirt and cargo pants stuck to his skin as perspiration built across his brow.

It was meant to be springtime, but there was nothing green or glossy out here. Just thickets of grey olive green that contrasted against the red dirt.

He could smell the rain and dust when a combined odour of wet dog and rotten eggs hit him. It was potent.

The source was a herd of large grey and white beasts waiting in railed yards. ‘What kind of cattle are they?’ They weren’t typical milking cows that’s for sure.

‘Brahman.’

‘Yeah, right.’ He’d never seen so many, but he was more interested in learning about this place. ‘So, is this it?’ Jax asked Mike as they leaned out the window. Google didn’t show much about the town or anything else in this tiny region surrounded by a whole lot of nothing.

‘Guess so.? We try not to stay here long.’

‘Why?’

‘Because of those.’ Mike sighed heavily as he pointed to the side of the track where two small white crosses stood in the red dirt, spotlighted by the rising sun. ‘They reckon this place is haunted... or cursed. No one saw them. Sure, we’ll hit the odd cow, donkey, or camel out here on the tracks—but kids? Mate, there’s no how-to company policy to recover from that one.’

‘That’s tragic.’ Jax could empathise, he’d witnessed first-hand the carnage caused by aircraft and assorted road vehicles, but never trains—and he didn’t want to.

But he was keen to check out the place that was about to become his new hometown.

\* \* \*

The dining room was buzzing with female voices as Lucy served litres of tea and pounds of fluffy scones. ‘Here you go, ladies.’ Lucy placed a steaming teapot on the table for the supermum Karen Kimble. Seated beside her was the ever-creative handy woman, Kat. Both fellow players of their outback softball team, the *Dusty Dingos*.

‘Please tell me you smuggled in some coffee for me?’ Kat whined.

‘Not today, sorry. Nancy’s at her—’

‘Nastiest,’ finished Karen with a grin.

Lucy squeezed her lips together to hide her grin, placing a three-tier cake stand onto their table, laden with the traditional Tea House three courses. Starting with dainty savoury sandwich fingers of thinly sliced cucumber, assorted cold meats, scotch eggs, and cheese flan wedges. For the second tier, plump, buttery scones were served with pots of local jams and clotted cream. Leading to the finale of petit fours, macaroons, sugared-



jellied fruits, hand-made chocolates, and slices of Nancy's supreme sponge cake. All the trimmings of a high tea served, no matter what time the train arrived.

'What this town needs is some decent coffee,' said Kat, dropping a spoonful of sugar into her dainty teacup. 'We should go steal Doctor Stewart's coffee machine.'

'Why have you stopped calling him the Hot-doc? It's your nickname,' Karen asked Kat, pouring out their tea.

'I have a husband who'll get jealous, so I do my best to avoid Stewart.'

'Why? You kissed him, so what?' Karen said with a shrug.

'You did? When?' Lucy asked, peeking around to see if Nancy was busy with her guests and took a rare moment to sit in the spare seat at the table.

'That happened before I got back with Kyle,' said Kat as bluntly as always. 'Hello, this is a small town, so I had to tell him. Hey, talking about gossips, where's our walking billboard, Cecil?'

'Snacking in his pen out the back. Although, Esther should have collected him by now. You must try the sandwiches. Tell me what you think?' Lucy asked in a soft voice, fidgeting with her fingers. 'I did something new with the mayonnaise and it has to be my best horseradish crème ever. Just don't tell Nancy, huh?'

'You are such a great cook,' said Karen, closing her eyes dreamily as she bit into her sandwich.

'No, I'm not.' Lucy caught the supermum's cocked eyebrow. If it wasn't for Karen dragging Lucy to their softball games, she'd never play or do much of anything but hide in the kitchen. 'I'm getting better.'

'Glad to hear it, hon,' said Karen, patting Lucy on the hand in a motherly fashion. 'My six boys would eat nothing but spaghetti 24/7 if I let them. We should all be like Verily who can't cook but has her guy dishing

up the most delish-of-dishes for her. Speaking of the coach, here's our queen of the road now.' Karen pointed toward the large road train pulling in.

Its massive wheels stopped with a hiss. The driver's door opened and Verily climbed down from the high cab, to stroll across the car park in her well-worn boots and jeans. Her sports gear was a rarity these days, kept purely for practises. She opened the Tea House's front door, scraped her boots on the mat and removed her Akubra before stepping inside.

A scowling Nancy moved to block Verily at the door.

'It's okay, Nancy,' hollered Karen as if on the softball field. 'That's not a jillaroo, it's our celebrity world champion. Hey, I can brag about it now, huh? We're on the wall of fame.'

Verily side-stepped Nancy, then smiled widely at her friends. 'Hey there, guys.' Lucy moved from her seat. 'No, stay.'

'I can't, sorry,' said Lucy, although she'd love to. 'I'll get you some water, and the usual tea?'

'Yes, please. Although today I'd love a coffee,' Verily said with a pronounced American twang to her accent. 'They have coffee in the stockman's shed, why can't we get it here?'

Lucy winced at Nancy swirling around as if to pounce on a palm rat.

'That isn't a shed!' Nancy screeched, with hands on hips, scowling at the youngest women in the dining room. 'If you want floor scrapings and coffee among the cattle, by all means, there's the door where the sign says *Traditional Tea House*. Not café. Not coffee shop. Tea. House. And we have a tradition in this town that this is and shall always remain a Tea House. If you want coffee, you can go—'

'They're customers, Nancy. W-w-women,' butted in Lucy. 'You can't kick them out, it's against t-t-tradition.'

Nancy's frown deepened at the wincing Lucy. 'Well, if they wanna stay, they eat and drink what's on the flamin' menu, or leave.' Nancy

patted down her apron, pasted on a smile, then swivelled on her slippers to return to her guests.

'Bloody tea snob,' muttered Kat and the four of them sniggered like rebellious teenagers.

'Besides complaining about the tea, what brings you here then, Kat?' Lucy asked.

'I'm delivering my last case of candles, hoping the materials I need to make more are on this train. I sold out of everything at the Rosella Festival, including all of Aunty Bea's tutus.'

'Didn't you say you were going to do a candle making class, Kat?' Karen asked. 'I want to be ready before the storms start.'

'Why? What happens?' Verily asked. 'Remember, this is my first wet season in the Territory.'

'We get black-outs at the first crack of lightning,' replied Karen. 'The power gets zapped and we're all scrambling for candles while unplugging everything before it fries our circuits. Last year, our boat-shed got hit. Will you be sharing your candle recipe that keeps the midges and mozzies away?'

'Absolutely. That's the one Aunty Bea's been bothering me for the most,' said Kat, retrieving her phone from her backpack. 'We should set a date suitable for everyone.'

'I vote Tuesday night,' said supermum Karen, raising her hand as if in school. 'I can lock in my husband to watch the kids, and I'm sure Jenny has that night off from the hospital. What about you, Verily?'

'I'll be there. We're day-drivers only now, I enjoy going home at night,' said Verily with a wistful smile behind her teacup.

'What about you, Lucy?' Kat asked, scrolling through her phone's calendar. 'Aren't you working nights at the pub?'

‘Only Friday night and the train day dinner rush in the dining room.’ Lucy reached for the calendar kept by the sideboard. ‘Here, use this. I’ve marked down the train days for the rest of the year.’

‘What is this?’ Kat crinkled up her nose as she flicked over the pages for various pictures of scones.

‘All its missing is my aunt’s rosella jam,’ said Verily, giggling. ‘I doubt they’d let us put Alex’s rosella beer on there. It’d clash with the crockery.’

‘It’s the town’s fundraising calendar,’ said Lucy. ‘They would have sold a lot more if they’d added some spicy fireman or something.’

‘Are our local firemen hot?’ Verily asked.

‘God, no,’ said Karen, screwing up her face. ‘Maybe when he was younger, but we’ve only got the Chief Fire Warden, who’s retiring.’

‘Lucy didn’t send him into early retirement, did she?’ Teased Kat, winking at Lucy.

‘I have burned nothing, in...’ *two days*. ‘It’s not my fault, I blame the stove.’

The loud rumble of the train’s arrival stopped all conversation in the room, filled with assorted perfume, baked goods, and tea varieties. Porcelain cups clinked as they rested on matching saucers, cutlery clanked on plates, and the chattering room was replaced by expectant stares.

Hot steam rose like a curtain of fog from the station’s platform as the fresh teasing sprinkle of rain dissipated into the air. The train rolled to a stop and the carriage doors opened near the locomotive. A man stepped forward where the mists curled around his staunch figure.

Lucy gasped with hand to her throat. Her heart pounded in her chest.

He wore no Akubra. No RM Williams boots. No denim jeans, but sturdy steel-capped boots with cargo pants that hugged stocky thighs. His tight torso was gift-wrapped in a black t-shirt that accentuated his

muscular, ink-covered arms. Dark sunglasses shielded his eyes. It was as if the sultry devil of sin had stepped free from hell's steam bath. She bit on her lower lip to stop sighing.

'Is that another miner?' Kat whispered.

'They're on shut down — my Hubby's home, giving me the gift of this rare child-free moment,' said Karen as they all watched him through the window. 'That guy is hot.'

'Is it me, or did it suddenly get warm in here?' Verily asked.

'Didn't I just say that?'

'Oh, my god, he's coming inside...'

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