

a marriage of  
magic & adventure

a short story

A  
STRANGERS  
Storm

MEL A ROWE

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STORM

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**\*The Following Is Written in Australian English\***

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# Chapter 1

‘Marry me?’

‘What? No! Not when you don’t even know my name.’ Kelly frowned, stepping away from the Balinese waiter. He looked the same as all the other waiters working in the resort’s busy restaurant filled with tourists. Yet, he seemed so serious about his question. ‘Thank you, but no, I will not marry you.’

Damn, it was never meant to work. She reached into her pocket where the round stone medallion was

cold and smooth within her fingers. How could such a small trinket cause so much trouble?

‘Kelly?’

‘No speak-a-dah-English.’ That didn’t sound convincing, even to herself. But kudos to the waiter for finding out her name so quickly. But she wasn’t sticking around to find out how he knew either.

She headed through the hotel foyer, to find a special old man so she could return his trouble-causing-trinket that weighted heavily in her pocket.

‘Hey, Kelly.’

The familiar voice made her stop. ‘Mike?’ Her breath caught as she focused on the near perfect male-mirage—or her nightmare—who was trying to hug her.

But she still pushed him away. ‘What are you doing here?’ Why was her heart beating so fast?

Mike winced, slipping hands into the pockets of his board shorts. ‘You never came home.’

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'It's not my home when we're not together anymore.' But his presence made her doubt her decision. She then blinked at his casual dress. 'Where's your suit and tie, and why aren't you at work?'

'Why are you still here?'

'Duh, I was enjoying a tropical holiday that we'd planned as part of my cousin's wedding—which was great by the way. But you wouldn't know because you bailed to stay at the office and work twenty hours a day. So, if you'll excuse me, I don't have time to deal with you right now.' She turned away, unable to face Mike without her emotions rising. It was like focusing on a favourite memory, one she'd lost long before arriving here. Yet, her skin craved his touch and hated herself for causing the sorrow shadowing his eyes.

She'd warned Mike she'd go without him and to not expect her return—he'd made his choice and so had she.

But now Mike was here. Why?

A loud crack of thunder vibrated against the windows where some diners squealed and others flinched. The lights flickered as her own heart jolted at the ferocity and closeness of the storm outside.

Nope, she did not have time to think about Mike, not when she had layers of doom looming over her head. Did she dare race against the rain?

'Where are you going, Kel? And why did that waiter ask you to marry him?'

'You're not my keeper anymore.' Kelly stormed through the resort's air-conditioned foyer. She passed the sliding doors and out into the tropical air that engulfed her as if wading inside a bowl of hot, fragrant jasmine soup.

'What's the rush?' Mike called out, dashing after her.

'I have to do something.' Which would be impossible to explain to Mike, when she was having



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a hard time believing it herself. 'Look, Mike, if you're staying, please find another room in another hotel.'

A sizzle of lightning electrified the humid air that was darkening under pregnant clouds. Time was crucial and she needed to go now.

'What's going on?' Mike asked, grasping her elbow. 'You look like you're about to kick someone. Not me, I hope?'

Damn his crooked grin that made her stomach drop, every time she stared at the man she'd thought was her soulmate. But that was nothing more than a fantasy that got drowned within the day-to-day reruns of reality.

Although cutting him out of her life it allowed her to rediscover her own dreams, that sadly no longer included him. 'Get in line, cowboy. Better yet, why don't you find the front of the departure line at the airport you landed in,' she said over her shoulder as she tied her hair back against the wind, marching towards her hired scooter.

‘Nope, not leaving your side until we’ve talked. Hey, can you ride this?’ Mike pointed to the scooter parked among the scattered cars and flow of taxis, dropping off and collecting tourists at the hotel’s main doors.

She glared at Mike. ‘Are you asking if I can ride a bike?’

‘Well...’ He shrugged with a grin.

‘Ugh!’ Her communication skills still sucked, but she didn’t have time to explain.

Kelly jumped on the scooter, turned the key, kicked up the stand, and gunned the engine she’d been playing with this past week.

A week of refusing to answer any of Mike’s phone messages and emails. A week spent building her bridge of denial against her soul’s obsession—Mike.

Yet, Mike was here. Well, she could fix that. ‘See-ya.’

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'No you don't.' He hopped onto the back of her seat. 'Where are we going?'

'Hey, get off. No rear-seat whiners allowed.' How could she steer with his extra weight on board?

'You're the only person I know in this country.'

'If you'd arrived, when you were meant to, you would've seen my whole family here.' Mike had always gotten on well with them, which had made it so much harder for her to front them solo.

'How was your cousin's wedding?'

'What do you care? You don't believe in marriage or weddings.' It was something she'd pined for once, but he never asked. It didn't matter now.

Once they'd been so committed to each other where they'd shared some wonderful years together. In the end, she'd done nothing more than wait for Mike to come home, and when he did he was too tired to do anything.

Fine, his job came first, so now she was putting herself first too.

'I didn't say I don't believe in marriage. It's the wedding and all that money spent on one event. You'd told me your cousin spent five thousand dollars on one dress—that she'll only wear once. For that same sum of money we could live like royalty for months in this country.'

'That's why they held the wedding in Bali to afford all the bells and butterflies she could want. It was a nice over the top extravaganza and everything you'd expect from my cousin. She even had flamethrowers.'

'I'd believe it. Fireworks too?'

'Yeah.' There it was, that same close casualness in their conversations as if it had never left them. They used to laugh at her cousin's flamboyant flair, while making their own fun from nothing.

Nothing is what their relationship turned out to be.

Nothing but silence.

'So, how come you stayed?' Mike asked.

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'Because it's on my itinerary to be here for a month. I've got no other commitments to anyone or anything, except to myself.' She couldn't look at him. Didn't want to speak to him—especially when he shouldn't even be here. Yet, unable to fight the familiarity of his presence, she let him remain, and they rode out of the resort on a mission to find an old man.

# Chapter 2

Kelly steered the scooter amongst the chaotic streets clogged with bikes, carts, and overcrowded tourist-filled sidewalks.

Mike, seated behind her, pointed at the many sites on the busy roads of the tropical island. They pulled up at the esplanade. A row of hotels towered across the road that led to the beach where huge waves pounded the shore.

'This is a great spot, Kel. We should do surfing lessons once this storm passes. I'm keen to try if you are?'

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'I've already tried.' She caught Mike's raised eyebrows in the side mirror as he unfolded himself from the small scooter's seat.

'Really?' He inhaled the strong sea-salted air.

'I've had surfing lessons. Rode an elephant. And, I haven't watched TV since I arrived, and haven't missed it.' But she'd missed Mike. *Damn.* 'If you'd used your ticket—that I'd paid for—you would've done it too. But you weren't here then and shouldn't be here now.'

'I'm here to explain—'

'I don't want to hear your excuses, not when I have other issues to deal with.' Kelly got off the bike and headed for the small cart covered in handmade jewellery and carved idols. Burning incense clouded the mobile stall being pushed by an elderly Balinese male. 'Putu?'

'Ah, it's the sad girl, who now looks determined girl, yes?' The street peddler's face crinkled as he shared a toothless smile that exuded a trusting

warmth. Yet the twinkle in his dark eyes hinted at the mischief he'd caused since their first meeting.

'Hi, Putu, I'm here about your medallion.' She held out the onyx stone nestled in her palm. Its carved portrait showed a four-armed elephant that stood like a man, dressed in ceremonial robes.

'Did it work, yes?'

'It worked too well. Although, you should start calling it the medallion of mischief.'

'What's the medallion for?' Mike asked, stepping in beside her.

'For marriage,' replied Putu with a wide smile and nod.

'For what?' Mike screwed up his nose at her. 'You bought that?'

'No.' Kelly crossed her arms to hide the medallion in her hands.

'Where d'ya get it then?'

'I give it to sad girl watching wedding all alone,' replied the smaller Putu. 'Girl so sad she never gets



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married, so I give her magic medallion to find marriage.'

'Really?' Mike's lopsided grin grew, mirroring Kelly's stance as he crossed muscular arms over his broad chest.

*Not good!* Mike didn't need to hear this.

'You do all steps, yes?' Putu asked with a nod.

Again, another crack of lightning led the roll of thunder as waves pounded the beach so hard it roared. Kelly nodded while wincing at the ferocity of the weather.

Putu stepped closer, squinting up at Kelly. 'Are you sure?'

Kelly only gave it a go because she'd drunk too much at the wedding, dealing with her family looking at her like she was an old maid. Oh, and it was Grandma who'd insisted.

She turned her back on Mike and said in a low voice to Putu, 'I melted three drops of candle wax onto the medallion in front of a mirror. Then I rubbed

it until it was clean like I was polishing it...' She dropped her head, as heat rushed to her cheeks. 'I wished for marriage and wore it to bed.' Well, that's what she might have done, considering her intoxicated status from two nights ago.

'It worked, yes?'

She couldn't look at Mike who'd stepped in beside her and was picking up small trinkets from Putu's cart, but she knew he was listening. 'I've had eight marriage proposals just this morning.'

Mike frowned as he dropped the small idol among the many on Putu's cart and faced Kelly. 'Who proposed? And what the hell was your response?'

'I have no idea who those men were and I was just getting coffee.' Was Mike jealous?

Putu stared at the sky, shaking his head from side to side. 'You accept offers for marriage, yes?'

'Of course not.' She'd been proposed to by strangers and not by the one she'd wanted. Yet, miraculously, Mike was here. How? *Why?*

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‘Ah, that explains storm.’ Putu waved to the heavy clouds swirling above. ‘You’ve made our gods angry, and this storm will only get stronger and may destroy our island, yes.’ Putu pointed at the massive waves crashing on the beach.

Only yesterday the warm golden sands were littered with sun-worshipping tourists. Today, only the staff braved the shoreline. They wrestled with large beach umbrellas turned inside out, as sand whipped across the esplanade and threatened to pit against the many hotel windows that lined the foreshore.

‘Are you saying this storm is because Kelly said no to a marriage proposal?’ Mike tilted his head and turned on the power of his easy grin that rendered her numb. A warm kind of numb.

‘I didn’t think it’d work,’ Kelly mumbled. Again, lightning flashed brighter than a thousand cameras as thunder travelled down her spine and

through her sandals' soles. She'd never felt more connected to a storm like this.

'Who proposed?' Demanded Mike with hands on his hips.

She frowned. 'None of your business. I'm not on your radar anymore, and you shouldn't even be here.'

Mike lowered his head to meet hers and with a deep breath, as if forcing himself to be patient, he said, 'But I am here... for you.'

Kelly swallowed at the intensity of Mike's stare that disintegrated layers of her poorly fabricated cocoon of denial. 'Why?'

'Your Grandma told me where to find you.'

Kelly rolled her eyes. 'This is all Grandma's fault, you know.'

'The matriarch of your family is a good businesswoman, yes. She's a smart lady who spotted many scams.' Putu nodded up at the couple before him.

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'I thought that this was just another one of Grandma's scams.' How wrong had she been? Kelly held out the medallion with its leather band fisted in her palm. The onyx stone carving of an elephant's face glinted from the lightning's skeletal fingers that were playing their invisible piano keys across the ebony skies.

'Don't blame your Grandma, I like her,' said Mike.

'It's true. This is all Grandma's fault.' Because Grandma had found out Kelly was travelling alone to the family wedding.

So it was all Mike's fault too.

Her cousin's wedding date had given Mike ample notice to book in leave from work. It also gave them plenty of time to plan and pay for plane tickets, accommodations, and visas. Originally, they'd planned to spend a month exploring Bali that included a week of family and wedding events, and then three weeks playtime as a couple.

But how could they be a couple when one of them never showed up?

Kelly had looked forward to spending some selfish time with Mike on this trip. That was until Mike phoned her, in-between meetings, to cancel their holiday date at the last minute like she was some client!

After that phone call, she went forward without him. Permanently.

It was Grandma who had insisted Kelly store her gear and escort Grandma and her pile of pills to her cousin's wedding-week in Bali.

At the ceremony, Kelly had escaped to her own pity-party for one with a bottle of champagne on the beach. That was until Grandma found her.

Dearest, darling, Grandma, who'd complained of bad hips for weeks, power-walked through dry sand faster than a Tri-athlete, dragging along Putu and his magical marriage medallion. Again, it'd been Grandma who'd demanded Kelly take the steps to

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activate the spell, which she did half-heartedly, unbelieving in any hocus-pocus.

But it worked—too well.

‘How do I stop the marriage proposals and this storm, Putu?’ She shivered at the drop in temperature, smelling the rain coming across the sea like a sheet of grey impenetrable iron.

‘You take it home, yes.’

‘I’m not taking this back to Australia? I’m not ready to go back yet,’ said Kelly, ignoring Mike’s frown.

‘No, you must return it from where it came. Yes?’ Putu pointed to the mountain hidden behind thick thunderous clouds as palm trees whipped back like a bow arches for an arrow.

‘Great.’ *Not.*

‘You’re not going up there, are you?’ Mike asked.

‘I don’t need your permission.’ Not when this was her own mess to clean. And in the future, she’d

think twice about trying any exotic superstition and tradition. 'How do I get the medallion home, Putu?'

'Follow the road until no more road. Then climb roped path until no more path. There you'll find the cave where you must place medallion at the Marriage God's feet. Easy, yes?' Putu drew a map on the paper bag from his stall.

'How long will it take to get there?' Kelly asked.

Putu pulled down the side covering of his stall and locked it in place. 'Hour ride, hour walk, maybe? You go now, save our island, make gods happy, yes?' Putu said more as a demand, shoving the map in her hands and then started pushing his cart against the wind.

'I'll try. Thanks, Putu.' Kelly stared at the map then slipped it into her backpack alongside the medallion she'd never wear again. 'See-ya, Mike, take care of yourself. Try not to work too hard.' Kelly headed for her bike and gulped at the veiled mountaintop. She took her seat on the scooter,



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flinching at the lightning while all the sensible people dashed indoors to brace against the storm.

Could she do this?

‘I’m coming with you,’ Mike said as he climbed onto the scooter behind her. ‘Can’t believe you’re riding a scooter, and you’re good at it.’

‘I always wanted one.’ Kelly had wanted to do lots of things until she moved to a new city. Somehow, she’d become too lazy to venture further than the suburb she lived in—had lived in—with Mike. ‘If you tag along, I want no lip from you.’

Mike raised his palms in surrender. ‘I’m the passenger, you lead the way.’ Then he slid his hands around her waist and cuddled up closer. ‘This is nice, Kel.’

His body-heat sent contrasting shivers across her spine that made it harder for her to focus. It was impossible to hate Mike when he was like this when he’d always been affectionate. She missed his hugs, their endless conversations, and comfortable silences.

Most of all, she'd missed Mike's presence of being with her and to have his focus fully on her. Yet, he'd become so distracted with his job that their dialogue had been reduced to the same text message of: *can't I'm working*. In the end, he just wasn't there.

'Reminds me of what it was like when we first dated. You'd come up with the ideas as the start of our many adventures. I missed that about you, Kel, and our adventures.'

'I'm not listening.' Even if she'd missed that about herself too.

But she had to focus first on getting the medallion home before the storm unleashed its fury, and with luck, stop other strangers proposing to her.

# Chapter 3

Following Putu's scrawled-out-map, they headed for the mountain, passing colourful sarong-clad women balancing large trays of tropical fruit pyramids.

Bracing against the wind, they hiked alongside sprawling rice-field terraces carved into the side of steep hills. They rode through small villages where children stopped and stared as their parents tried to herd them towards the storm shelters.

Still, they drove higher through the sticky heat and into cool clouds where the road narrowed to a mere dirt track. They pulled up to the road's end

where a roped path ran alongside the mountain's wall.

'It looks like it'll snow, it's cold enough.' Mike got off the bike and rubbed his bare arms as he peered through the mists that hid the peak. 'So, I'm guessing we go up?'

Kelly rechecked Putu's map. 'We've followed till there was no more road, now we climb until there's no more path.'

She tried to swallow down the lump in her throat while staring up at the path that disappeared around the bend. The tropical island's valley was hidden below, yet they could be in the middle of Ireland shrouded in all this mist.

Kelly folded away the map, grabbed the coarse rope that ran along the path like a rail, and began the arduous climb. Thick raindrops fell, releasing an invigorating perfume of an electrified earth that vibrated from the thunder.

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'I'm so out of practice... And ill-equipped.' Wearing sandals and a summer dress for hiking up the side of a mountain was not her preferred choice. Her skirt whipped around her like an untied ship's sail as her shoes' thin soles slid on wet rocks, but she couldn't stop now.

'Are we climbing to the top?' Mike asked.

'You don't have to do anything. You can go home.'

'I'm not leaving you alone, Kel. I'm here to join you on this adventure.' Mike panted as he followed her up the small dirt track, holding the thick rope strung along the rocky wall. 'You used to enjoy rock climbing. Why'd you stop?'

'Location.' Kelly wiped at her hair sticking to her skin. She squinted through the raindrops that were fast becoming the first stages of a Balinese water torture.

'What do you mean, location? Look at this view—this location is brilliant.' Mike waved at the

cluster of tropical islands, dwarfed by menacing clouds.

‘I stopped when I moved to another city to live with you. I left behind things I shouldn’t have. And somehow, I forgot who I was. I’m so unfit.’ She gasped for air, climbing higher her leg muscles burned.

Mike panted alongside. ‘Me too. When did that happen? Or is the air getting thinner?’

Kelly knew why. For this past week, she’d done nothing but think about it, and now it was time to speak up. ‘I think we became a classic-couch-couple where our conversations were confined to commercial breaks. Which is so wrong, when we used to dream of exploring the world together but ended up watching other peoples’ adventures on reality TV. When it’s all here, before us...’ She stopped to admire the break in the clouds that exposed the raw beauty of the choppy green sea swell. The ferocity of the wind’s howl pushed against

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her, as thunder growled, and lightning speared across the sky. She'd never felt more alive.

With a deafening crack, a bolt of lightning lashed out at the mountaintop it sent rocks hurtling towards the sea. Kelly's scream got lost in the roar of the incoming wall of rain.

*'Run.'* Mike seized her hand and together they fled through the mud and blinding rain. Along the path they dashed for the safety of the cave.

Inside, their chests heaved to catch their breath, while their eyes adjusted to the dim light and pungent scents of damp earth mixed with fragrant frangipani.

*'Woah, check that out.'* Mike stared with open mouth at the cave's temple-like-interior made from onyx stone. Its rich black veins swallowed shadows from flickering candles that rested in a bed of cream, frangipani flowers. They were spread around the base of a massive four-armed elephant, standing in ceremonial robes, carved into the cave wall itself.

Kelly craned her neck as her eyes widened at the sheer size of the statue. She recognised its portrait as the same one etched onto her dark medallion's face. The medallion was of the same black stone that made up the sculpture, hidden within a cave, on the side of a mountain that stood amongst the many that towered over this tropical island.

Her legs trembled with adrenaline. Her dress clung to her body as her feet squelched in sandals gritty from the mud. But none of that mattered to Kelly as she placed her medallion beside dozens of replicas at the statue's base. She stepped back, catching her breath, and waited.

'What now?' Mike asked beside her, while the storm continued to unleash its fury outside.

Kelly shrugged as they both turned to face the mouth of the cave where rain fell in grey sheets. And they waited. What could they do? It was either run through the rain or wait to dry...



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But then the pounding rain stopped as if someone had turned off a tap. Sunlight crept against the darkness of the cave's edge. They stepped closer as once-heavy clouds dispersed like wisps of white smoke revealing an infinite Indian blue skyline. The choppy ocean returned to a glass-like azure blue, and the howling wind calmed to a whispering breeze that lazily curled around their rain-soaked bodies.

'It worked.' Mike's quiet words that once fought to be heard, now echoed off the cave's chiselled walls.

'I guess so.' Kelly shared a small smile at the epic scene beautifully unedited, better than any filtered Instagram shot. It was real.

Did that make magic real?

Mike turned to face her. 'So, no more strange men are going to ask you to marry them from here on out?'

She shrugged. 'Hope not.'

'How many men proposed to you?'

'I lost count after the first dozen. There were a few tourists from the bar, a taxi driver, some surfers, and the rest were hotel staff and guests. I'd never met any of them before, so I guess the medallion's magic must only work on strangers? Hey, why are you here, Mike?'

'I was at the airport, yesterday afternoon, hoping you'd return with your family after the wedding. But you weren't on that plane.'

'Obviously not.' Because she'd waved them all off from her hotel's foyer.

'You'd missed out on me copping this wicked lecture from your Grandma in front of everyone.'

'I see you survived.' Kelly turned to the altar and bowed her head at the statue. 'Thanks, but no thanks on the men you'd sent to propose.' She headed towards the sunshine and paused at the cave's mouth. It was amazing how fast the storm had disappeared. The vista now displayed glistening

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glorious seas that stretched beyond the island's rainforests and rice fields.

'Do you still want to get married?' Mike asked.

'After the crap I've been through, and coping with my family's old maid spiel, I guess I'll always be alone. But I'm okay with that now.'

Mike grabbed her hand and laced his fingers through hers. 'I'm sorry for being an idiot, and for not being here sooner. I know my work interfered, and it consumed me too. Also...' He cringed, taking a sharp breath, and said, 'I didn't want to go to the wedding and deal with the pressure from your family.'

'Well, consider yourself permanently spared from that speech on saving my virtue. Grandma told them you were working when they arrived and you weren't mentioned again.'

'But you moved out and quit your job.'

'I wasn't living, I was waiting—when I wanted more.'

'I know, and I'm the same.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

Kelly bit her bottom lip. Her trouble was she sucked at communicating what she wanted to say, where Mike had a gift for words—but they'd both stopped talking altogether.

And that needed to change today.

She inhaled deeply, licked her lips and confessed, 'I became something else, dwelling inside a suburban wasteland. We both did.'

Mike nodded as he peered at her through strands of wet tousled hair she was tempted to brush aside. 'I know you sacrificed a lot for what was my dream job. Giving up so much for me and my happiness, where we both ended up miserable.'

'I thought you were happy there? You were always at the office.'

'Sure, in the beginning, I was. I'd learned a lot those first few months. But living that job, pulling long hours, I was exhausted. Come on, I wanted to be

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a writer, a poet, not a corporate copywriter, editing annual reports and playing media liaison. I know now, that job's not for me.' His thumb brushed the back of her hand warming her all over. 'After you left, I realised I wasn't living or being true to myself either. When I saw you earlier in the foyer, the way your eyes shone and the life within them now, you're doing what's right for you. I can see it. You're the same girl I fell in love with when we first spoke of creating our travel blog. You'd take the photos and I'd write our story, where we'd work in whatever job we could while travelling until we found a home to bring up our own family.'

'That was just a dream.' One they'd spent hours planning together, living in a friend's basement while finishing university. Being broke they'd dreamed big back then. 'Besides, we've both changed,' she said, dropping her gaze.

'We're still the same, Kel, we both just got lost as individuals.' With a finger, he lifted her chin to

make her look at him. 'I don't have the courage to be me without you, because you made me believe I could realise my goals and supported me all the way. I'm sorry I hurt you by not being there, and for not supporting you with your goals too.'

'I'm as much to blame, and you don't need to hold my hand anymore.' She tried to pull her hand free but Mike wouldn't let go. 'Hey?'

'I'm not finished, Kel.'

'You don't have to say anything.'

'Yes, I do. And I should have said this sooner. It nearly destroyed me when I'd realised you'd left me and weren't coming back. I hated not being able to talk to you and for not being near you. I never want to feel like that again.' Mike lowered his forehead, his nose almost touching hers.

Again, she was pulled into his familiar masculine aroma that was always a home to her soul.

Breath hissed through his teeth, and his deep voice was edged with pain as he spoke, 'I know how

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much I love you. I also know there's no home without you beside me, no matter where we go. If it's climbing a mountain into a dark cave, my place is and will always be at your side. So I can't let you go. I won't.' He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. 'I'd be proud to be your life partner. Do you still...' He cleared his throat, licked his lips as he raked fingers through his damp hair. 'Will you marry me and forgive the idiot I am?'

Kelly gasped as her eyes widened. 'You said you'd never—'

'They say the stars shine brightest when you're in love. Yet what I see, is that the sun shines brighter than all the galaxies within the eyes of the person who loves me the most, and that person is you... I hope you can see how much you mean to me too.'

He hadn't spoken like that in ages. Mike used to share his poetry with her daily, that even after such a long absence, his lyrical words once-again filled her heart with warmth. 'I, I...' The sun reflected the gold-

green flecks within his eyes that showcased his vulnerability and pain he'd suffered from their separation. But most of all, she saw his love for her.

'I'm asking now. We can elope today if you want, then we'll explore the world as our constant honeymoon?'

'But...'

She touched her tangled hair, glancing at her filthy dress and her mud-splattered legs. This wasn't how she'd imagined this moment.

A moment she'd given up on ever happening.

'Here, let me try to convince you.' Mike held her chin and drew her closer. As the heat of his sensually sculptured lips pressed against hers, Kelly's reality tumbled and her dreams became alive. Her fingers gripped his wet t-shirt as their kiss deepened, and his love repossessed her soul.

'You don't want to upset the Marriage God and start another storm if you refuse?' He shared his crooked grin with the telltale crinkles around his eyes



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she used to trace with her fingertips. She hadn't seen them for so long and smiled at their return.

'If you put it that way, yes.' Her body moulded against his as an intoxicating euphoria washed over her.

'So, now that our deal's been kiss-sealed before a god,' he said, nodding towards the statue that overshadowed them, 'how about we take a slow stroll downhill while we re-plan our life's adventure?'

'You're on.' Kelly smiled wide as her heart refuelled itself with love and they stepped out into the sunshine. When she peeked back at the silent statue and whispered, 'thank you.'

'What?'

'I'm grateful you're here.' She squeezed Mike's hand. Grateful it worked.

*And now, read an extract from...*

The ART of  
**Dust**

MEL A ROWE

# One

**I**t's a strange sensation being weighed down by guilt. It made Kat grip the steering wheel tighter while her internals stirred with the giddy sensation she'd once loved as a child. All from the faded road sign that read, *Welcome to Elsie Creek*.

'Did you live here, Mummy?' Kaytlyn asked, brushing away the auburn strands freeing themselves from her pigtails. Her sparkling, lapis lazuli blue eyes, took in the passing view.

'Only for the summers.'

‘When?’ Kaytlyn asked, straining her neck to see while her finger marked the page of the colouring book nestled within her purple tutu.

‘Before you were born.’ Back when life was so much simpler.

‘How come you’ve never told me about this place?’

Kat never wanted to. She didn’t even want to make this trip.

‘Is that a tractor? And, it’s...*moving*.’ Kaytlyn waved energetically at the farmer like he was a famous movie star, driving a slow tractor as they passed him on the road. ‘This is the country, isn’t it? Like real milk-making country?’

‘Not that kind of cow, sweetheart. They’re beef cattle.’

Their hire van, with the U-Haul trailer rattling behind them, slowed as they approached the herd spilling over the sides of the road. Men in sweat-stained Akubra’s steered their quads around the

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cattle with horns bigger than the handlebars on their bikes. Stocky Blue and Red Heelers yapped at the Brahman's heels, while more stockmen on horseback whistled as the odd stockwhip crack rang in the air.

'Mum, they're cowboys rounding up the herd!'

'Don't call them that. This is Australia and they're cattlemen, stockmen, ringers or drovers, and they're mustering the mob or they're droving. *I think*—it's been a while.'

She drove through the herd and continued along the open highway that stretched like a never-ending black carpet. It sliced through the centre of red dirt scrublands, with the railway line running alongside. All heading for the tiny Northern Territory town, dead ahead.

They passed rolling fields of drying grass waving in the breeze like a huge green sea. Tall gum trees crested hills that kissed the cerulean skyline where wallabies lazed in their shade. Nestled amongst its bark-peeling branches were flocks of

white cockatoos, hiding from the late afternoon sun. The familiar countryside generated an electrical hum beneath Kat's skin. She was glad this long drive was almost over.

Then the hard part would begin.

Again, the weight of dread slammed heavily across her shoulder blades.

'Can't wait to go bushwalking with you, Mummy.' Kaytlyn clicked the heels of her new hiking boots, peeking out from the edge of her tutu.

Kat hadn't hiked in years. 'Tell me again, please, what are the rules of walking anywhere out here?'

'Always take a hat, a water bottle, sunscreen, snacks for the trail, and tell someone where you're going. Carry a big stick to smack the ground to scare snakes and goannas getting suntans across the tracks. Don't use the stick to poke down holes, coz the scorpions and spiders can kill you. Don't climb trees that don't have green ants on 'em coz they'll have white ants that eat trees inside out, so they'll break.

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Don't play near fruit bats coz they can make you very, very sick. Don't pat the cattle coz of their horns...um, am I missing something?'

'Water. What did I tell you about the water? It's the most important,' —*and terrifying*— 'part.'

'Oh, I'm never ever allowed to go swimming in any of the water holes, billabongs, rivers, lakes, streams or seas, and I have to stay back from the water's edge coz the man-eating crocodiles like to eat children for lunch.'

The place didn't sound like fun at all. 'Are you okay with all that?' Kat wasn't.

'I can't wait. How come you know all this when you grew up in the city, like me?' Kaytlyn sat taller, her fingertips reaching for the dashboard, causing her crayons to spill out of her tutu and onto the floor of their rental van.

'I used to stay with Uncle Frank and Aunty Bea for school holidays.' A time she once lived for.

'Bee, like a black and yellow stripy bee that stings? I can spell that—B.E.E.'

'Brilliant. Although, the native bees here don't sting, but the wasps do.' Was there anything good she could share without scaring her daughter back to the more civilized southern states of Australia. 'Oh, and you spell Aunty Bea, B.E.A. It's short for Beatrice.'

Kaytlyn sat back mouthing the letters, committing the new spelling word to her fast-growing vocabulary. 'How come they don't visit us?'

'How many days has it taken us to get here?'

'Five. It's the longest road trip of my life!'

Kat laughed at the seriousness of the six-year-old wearing a tutu and hiking boots.

'Do Aunty Bea and Uncle... ' Kaytlyn waved her crayon like a wand.

'Frank, short for Franklin.' Everyone's name was shortened, including her own of Kathryn to Kat.

'Yeah, him. Do they have any children I can play with?'



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'No.' *They would've loved some.* 'I'm sure there are plenty of new friends to make in your new school, honey.' Kat hoped she sounded excited when she'd rather be back in their studio apartment. All this space was daunting compared to the comforting claustrophobic cocoon of a capital city.

She sat higher behind the steering wheel as they entered the town's main street, with its row of shops on either side. There was the hardware-feedstore, the small supermarket, and the mighty pub that stood proud as the centre of this small country town. There was a park with signs pointing to the train station's Tea Room.

Even though she hadn't seen the place in seven years, the town was the same, as if stuck in some weird time warp, except now it had a set of pedestrian lights guarding a zebra crossing.

'What's that?' Kaytlyn asked, pointing to the road ahead.

Kat slammed on the brakes and stared over the steering wheel with wide eyes. 'I think it's a water buffalo.'

A short, black, shiny-nosed water buffalo stood smack in the middle of the road, in the centre of town. It stared at them through long black lashes, chewing like a cow, with red ribbons waving on the breeze from its curved horns.

Was it going to charge their hire van?

'It's got ribbons on it, Mummy, so it must be someone's pet, huh?'

A ute across the road tooted its horn, and the driver shouted out of his window. '*Get off the road, Cecil.*'

The buffalo kept chewing as he ever so casually strolled in front of Kat's car. Red ribbons waved off its horns and tail, and on its sides were large letters written in bright red chalk.

'What does that writing say, Mummy?'

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'Um...Choose your movie for the marathon today.' *Weird.*

As the buffalo ambled along the sidewalk, they continued down the main street in silence. At the outer edge of town, they turned onto a bitumen road, where properties extended into acreage.

A group of children played in the street while push bikes lay in the grass on the side of the road.

Déjà vu hit Kat like she'd woken inside a dream, slowing down for the game of street-cricket where the children stopped and stared as they drove past.

'Mummy, how come they're playing on the road?'

'They do that in the country.' Just like she used to.

'There are more children on this street than in our whole building. Will they all be going to my new school?'

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'I assume so.' There was only one local bush school, with the nearest boarding school over four hours away by bus. It was a ride Kat knew well.

They approached the road's dead-end before an expansive field of golden grasses that rippled in the breeze. At the sight of the two-storey weather-worn house, her heart hitched a lump into her throat. 'We're here.'

Find the rest of the story  
at your favourite online bookstore...





## Acknowledgements

Thank you

Thank you—yes, *I'm talking to you*—Thank you.

Why?

I thank you for daring to take a chance by reading this short story that is an exclusive gift to readers who join my newsletter. It means a lot to me, and I look forward to sharing more with you in the near future.

Thank you, because I can, because I did, and because I continue to be eternally grateful ...

*mel*

A. ROWE

author of *Remittance Woman*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Australian bestselling author, Mel A ROWE, creates escapes for today's busy women to enjoy from the comfort of their home.

Delivered with a dash of drama, witty humour and quirky family units, Mel is known for reinventing romantic versions of home, taking her common characters on uncommon journeys that lead from boardrooms to billabongs as they try to find their own HAPPILY EVER AFTER.

Living in Northern Australia, Mel enjoys random outback road trips, fumbling with her camera, annoying her family with her bad singing, and making new friends in the middle of nowhere—except for water buffalos. She's been chased by a few.

Feel free to contact Mel, as her word journey continues, at...

[MelAROWE.com](http://MelAROWE.com)

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