

grab a handful of hope
& fly away home



Wags
DUST

THE ELSIE CREEK SERIES



MEL A ROWE

XMAS DUST

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MEL A ROWE

Also by Mel A ROWE

Avoiding the Pity Party

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USA Bestseller—Winter's Walk

***Australian Bestselling* ELSIE CREEK SERIES**

The ART of DUST

DIAMOND in the DUST

CAKED in DUST

XMAS DUST

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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 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.

Z E R O

Hope is a mistress of mystery, like the mythical muse is to the artist. Hope, some say, lives on a wing and a prayer. Yet, through the eyes of a child, hope is carried on a set of sturdy wings...

Covered in crayon, Monet's paper boat sent ripples across the water reflecting a monster skyline filled with fluffy white clouds in the shapes of elephants, unicorns, and puppets from her picture books.

On the doorstep, which led to the tiny farmhouse, Monet batted at the flies, frowning as the paper boat kept going past the washing line, leaving her behind.

It floated past the thick mass of flies swirling over the

wallaby caught in the fence near Mummy's vegetable garden. They'd been counting down the days to eat those strawberries, hoping to beat the ants.

Now there were no ants. No cows to sing to. There were no more wallabies to chase as they bounded across the plains. No grasses to hide in. No Daddy.

It was if the water had swallowed the world.

Monet flicked a bead of sweat from her brow. She wanted to wallow in the water like the buffalos, but she knew crocodiles lurked beneath the silvery surface. Daddy had warned her that all the water around home belonged to the Billabong Bunyip, who was bigger and scarier than a thousand crocodiles.

Tucking her toes under her dress, she blinked at her reflection. Blue eyes, tangled yellow hair, and sweat mixed with dirt streaked across her face. 'Look, Dolly, we're the same.' She held her precious rag doll next to her. The one Mummy made her ages ago.

Her belly rumbled again. Mummy didn't cook anymore.

A low buzzing in the sky caught her attention. It was the sound of a thousand flies, that grew louder. It came from the gigantic shadow of a straight-winged bird gliding down

through the clouds.

Was it real?

It flew overhead.

It was a plane!

'Daddy!' Monet jumped back into the kitchen where Mummy stood at the sink staring out the window. 'Daddy made it.' She tugged on her mother's arm. 'He's here, Mummy, come on.'

Her mother wouldn't move, like her baby brother in his cot.

The front screen door banged shut behind Monet as she ran with her rag doll. Waving her arms in the air, she ignored the stinging stones digging into her bare feet as she dashed across the red dirt to the top of their tiny hill.

The plane was beautiful, white, and sleek. It roared above her so fast; then swooped left and came in to land.

'Daddy. We waited, just like I promised.'

The plane skidded its wheels on the red soil covered with a fine sheen of green. They'd never had grass on their driveway before. The shed's roof shone in the sun, but their tractor inside remained underwater.

The plane stopped and Monet rushed for the opening door. 'Daddy?'

She frowned at the man clambering down the plane's ladder. It was their neighbour. 'Is my daddy with you, Mr Kirby?'

'No.' He crouched before the girl, tipping back his hat.

His wife followed in her beautiful dress and matching shoes. Mrs Kirby was so shiny.

'Where is Tucker?' Mr Kirby asked.

'Daddy went away in his boat...' Monet pointed to the river that hid the road to town that was a whole day's drive away. 'Did you see my Daddy in your plane?'

Mrs Kirby gasped, widening her glossy red lips, her shiny fingernails clutching her pretty necklace. She looked like a model from one of Mummy's magazines.

'That child is a feral fright! And, what is that god-awful smell? Don't you—'

'Beryl, enough,' snapped out Mr Kirby. He then turned to Monet and said in a gentler tone, 'When did your father leave?'

Monet shrugged. 'It was a few sleeps ago. We had power back then, but now our food's got maggots—but I kept the flies away from my brother, I gave him my mosquito net.'

'Jeez...' Mr Kirby stood tall, keeping a gentle hand on

Monet's shoulder. 'Tim, get out here. Bring that bottle of soft drink with you.'

'Honey,' said Mrs Kirby, screwing her nose at Monet, 'I don't think our boy should be out here with this—'

Mr Kirby silenced Mrs Kirby with one stare as he spoke to the boy jumping down from the plane. 'Share your drink with Monet and both you kids stay by the plane. Watch those dingoes don't chew the tyres.'

Mr Kirby didn't look back. His boots crunched on the coarse red soil, while he swatted at the flies as he headed for the screen door. Mrs Kirby followed, taking timid steps in her spiky shoes.

'Hey, do you want some? It's lemonade,' Tim asked Monet, holding up an icy cold bottle. He looked a few years older than her—nine or ten. 'We'll sit here—hold on, I'd better get a towel or Mum will get mad at me for getting my good clobber dirty.' Tim scrambled back into the plane.

'Your mummy looks like a lady from the magazine.' Monet stood on tippy toes, reaching for the plane's smooth wing. It was cool to the touch.

'We were going out for lunch.' Tim spread a towel under the shade of the plane's wing. Leaning back against the tyre, he poured two cups of the fizzy soft drink and they

sat cross-legged, staring at a world of water. 'A lot of rain, huh?'

'The water just kept coming—it didn't stop.'

'It's flooded everywhere. Dad reckons it's the twenty-year flood and calls this our inland sea,' he said. 'We drove all cattle to higher ground, knocking down fences to let the livestock through, so the herd's all good.'

'I've never seen the sea.'

'It's goes on forever. We go to the beach every year when we visit Mum's family.' Tim paused to sip from his drink. 'Where did your dad go?'

'To get help.' She glanced back to the last place she'd seen Daddy waving from his small boat. 'Daddy promised he was coming back.' And she had promised to be a good girl and wait for him.

A scream echoed through the house, sending the flock of galahs screeching from the roof.

The screen door slammed against the house as Mrs Kirby ran outside. Her shoulders lurched as she vomited, holding onto the tree.

Monet screwed her face up, finding it hard to swallow the sickly-sweet lemonade.

Tim jumped to his feet. 'Mum—'

‘Stay there,’ called out Mr Kirby, approaching with forceful steps. ‘You two stay right bloody there and don’t you dare move.’ He climbed into the plane, sat hard in the pilot’s seat and started flicking lots of dials.

Mrs Kirby kept retching at the base of the tree.

‘Elsie Creek Police, come in,’ said Mr Kirby through the radio’s handpiece. ‘Come in, Elsie Creek Police...’ He waited for a reply, staring hard at the floor. ‘Come on, Sarge, it’s Jack Kirby. I’m sorry to do this to you today, mate, but please, pick up.’

‘Elsie Creek Police, here. Go ahead, Jack,’ came the gruff voice from the plane’s speakers.

‘Sarge, I’m at Tucker’s place—’ Mr Kirby paused, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. ‘We’ve got a situation. There’s a dead baby with the mother um...’ He hesitated, inhaling sharply as if in pain.

‘What about Tucker?’

‘Gone. Tucker was meant to visit us last night, but didn’t show. We hadn’t heard from him in two days, so I did a flyover. The only one talking is the little girl who looks like she hasn’t eaten in a week, and the house is flyblown, mate.’

‘They’ll never get that stench out of the house, I tell

you. She was always loopy, that woman,' grumbled Mrs Kirby, wobbling on her heels as she continuously wiped her hands down her dress. Again, and again. 'I told Tucker not to marry that woman, she's crazy. Absolutely certifiable, is what she is.' Mrs Kirby snatched Tim's lemonade bottle and took a long, deep drink. 'When—how—that baby?' She scowled down at Monet.

'My baby brother just never woke up,' Monet said with a tiny voice, cowering from Mrs Kirby. 'He used to cry.'

'Aw, jeez.' Mr Kirby shook his head, speaking into the radio handpiece, 'What do you want us to do, Sarge?'

'Is Tucker's wife alive?'

'In shock, I reckon.'

'Can you bring the mother and child here to the hospital? I'll organise a search crew for Tucker. Let's get that woman and child safe.'

'Will do, Sarge. Over and out.' Mr Kirby jumped out of the plane. 'Beryl, get the kids sorted into their seats. I'll get Emma.'

'What about my baby brother?'

Mr Kirby again crouched before Monet, meeting her at eye level. 'Does your brother have a name?'

'No. I've been thinking of names while waiting for Daddy.'

'Why on earth didn't Tucker take his family?' Mrs Kirby asked.

'Didn't want to risk them. Emma's way too early.' With a tender palm on Monet's shoulder, he said, 'I'm so sorry, Monet, but your brother didn't make it. He's...'

'Dead.' Monet had heard him say it on the radio.

'I'm so sorry. Right now, we'll get you and your mother some help.'

'What about our luncheon at the Kingstons?' Beryl asked.

Mr Kirby frowned at her over his shoulder. The screen door to the house gave out its familiar creak before slamming shut behind him.

'What's he doing with my mummy?' Monet asked Tim, who brushed down his clean jeans just like his mother did with her dress.

'We're all going to town,' Tim said, folding up their towel.

'Town?' Monet touched her coarse hair, full of knots. You had to plan when visiting town, its where she'd have a big bath with bubbles from the shampoo. Mummy would

tie Monet's hair in ribbons to match her good dress and shoes, just like Tim and Mrs Kirby were dressed—proper.

With a fierce scowl, Mrs Kirby stormed towards them. 'All that food preparation and effort wasted, I tell you. I've been so looking forward to lunch at the Kingston's since forever. Now, this...' She blocked the sun, standing over Monet. 'I bet you'll end up as crazy as your mother.'

Monet hugged her dolly, biting her lip. She'd promised to be a good girl, and good girls never spoke back to grown-ups—especially those who said hurtful things about Mummy.

'Oh, no, you are *not* taking that filthy thing in our plane.' Mrs Kirby snatched the rag doll from Monet's arms and tossed it into the floodwaters.

'No! *Dolly!*' Monet tried to reach for it, but it got caught in the rushing current. She couldn't swim and stopped at the water's edge. Tears blurred her vision, watching her doll float away in the same direction Daddy had disappeared.

The front screen door creaked, then slammed shut as Mr Kirby's boots crunched on the dirt.

Monet whimpered, tasting the salt of her tears. Her dolly, gone. Her daddy, gone. Her brother didn't want to

play. And her mother was being carried out in a blanket by Mr Kirby.

Mrs Kirby pinched Monet's arm, dragging her to the plane. 'Let's go, you feral—'

'I can't leave. I've gotta wait for Daddy.' Monet ripped her arm free, ignoring the stinging red welts in the shape of Mrs Kirby's fingers, and ran back to the house. 'We can't leave my brother alone, it's not right. I promised Daddy I'd stay.'

The door slammed shut behind her as she hid inside the house's cooling shade by the Christmas tree where the lights no longer twinkled. Christmas cards were strung in a row nearby. Her drawings of Santa giving her family presents were stuck to their fridge buzzing with flies. Her eyes watered at the stench of rotten food from the powerless fridge, leaching slime onto the kitchen floor.

'Monet, we need to get your mother to the hospital,' said Mr Kirby, coming back inside. 'She needs you now to hold her hand.'

'What about my brother? I promised Daddy I'd be a good girl and stay and look after...'

She dropped her heavy head to her tightening chest. She'd failed.

'I'm sorry, but we can't do anything for your brother,'

he said, stroking her hair like her Daddy did. 'The police will come and help him. Right now, I need you to be strong for your mother.' He scooped her up and carried her out the door that banged behind them. 'You've got to be the toughest kid I've ever met. You know that?'

'I am?' She winced in the harsh sunlight, staring back at the dark house.

'Oh yeah, Territory tough. I reckon your dad would be so proud of you right now,' Mr Kirby said, carrying her to the plane. 'You'll sit next to Tim, and keep being that brave girl you are.' He clicked her into her seat belt, then banged the door shut.

In front, Mummy stared dead ahead, not saying anything. Mrs Kirby sat next to her, waving her hand in front of Mummy's face. It was rude, but Mummy didn't even blink.

Grown-ups squawked over the radio about search and rescues and last known sightings. Monet heard her daddy's name, Tucker, mentioned, but didn't understand what they were saying.

'Have you been in a plane before?' Tim asked from the seat beside her.

Monet shook her head, clutching her knees as her bare

feet swung miles off the floor.

'It's good, you get to see everything,' Tim said. 'We were going out for Christmas lunch. Dad's looking forward to tomorrow, we'll be watching the Boxing Day cricket match and playing with my new cricket set. Hey, what did Santa give you this morning?'

Monet shrugged. So much was happening. The plane's engine rumbled through her chest. The windmills on the wings spun so fast they became invisible.

'Here, you can have this.' Tim held out a small red aeroplane in the centre of his palm. 'This has a propeller that spins so we can fly and the wheels turn on it too. Merry Christmas.'

'Thank you.' Forced back against her seat as the aeroplane accelerated, she gripped the little toy red plane tight, missing her dolly.

'Hey, it's okay.' Tim grabbed her hand as the plane roared down the rocky driveway.

Monet gripped his hand tighter.

'We'll take you home,' he said with those big, light blue eyes and a warm smile. 'I promise to take care of you.'

Comforted by his hand, she clutched his toy to her chest as the world flew by so fast.

MEL A ROWE

'What did you ask Santa for Christmas?' Tim asked her.

'For my family to be home together,' she whispered, peering out the window, watching her home become a tiny house on an island surrounded by an ocean.

Their island had enough room for a plane to land—but not enough for a sleigh?

'Santa didn't come today,' she said, 'So, I must've been a naughty girl.'

ONE

20 years later...

Monet's steady boot steps competed with the rumbling wheels of her backpack, echoing down the corridor of the Unofficial Elsie Creek Inn. Bright light streamed from Rigsy's room, where her younger cousin was zipping up his duffel bag. 'Am I still right for that lift?'

'Yep,' Rigsy replied, sliding on his sweat-stained Akubra. 'You know, you could fly me back home. Mum would love to have you there.'

'I've got a better offer,' she said with a grin. Monet

didn't do Christmas. She didn't want to pretend to like the sucky gifts people gave. Stuff watching relatives being fake-nice before arguing enough to stop talking with each other until next Christmas.

Nope, she was looking forward to her chance to escape the whole Kris Kringle load of crapola. Every year she avoided the whole ho-ho-ho fiasco. Christmas was permanently cancelled from her calendar.

Through the lounge, she stepped over the assorted swags holding snoring men stretched out under the whirling ceiling fans. The pre-dawn shadows stretched beyond the open walls of louvres allowing the cool breeze and scents of rain to filter through.

It was a typical sight for the morning after the last big Christmas hooray in town. Elsie Creek may have gone tinsel-mad, as usual, but there was not one damned Christmas tree or bauble inside the Unofficial Elsie Creek Inn, and that's how she liked it.

In the kitchen of mismatched scrappy furniture, Monet refilled her water coolers. She glanced up at the now-bare spaces on top of her cupboards that used to display snow globes that would catch the sunlight, spreading tiny rainbows around the room. Now they were empty, like this

place would be in a few hours.

She missed her old housemate, Lucy. Maybe even her handmade Christmas cupcakes, annoying everyone with her Christmas cheer and Santa music loaded with bells.

Jingle bells, bah-humbug!

Bells should be banned!

‘Monet,’ said the gravelly baritone behind her. ‘You can’t leave me without a Christmas cuddle.’

She turned to face the stockman in his unbuttoned shirt. His jeans hugged his hips, the shiny rodeo champion belt buckle highlighting his muscular torso. In the typical boots and signature uniform of the slouchy Akubra, he was sexy with a hell yeah! But she was never touching that cowboy. ‘Craig, only after you’ve showered. Who knows what hay bale or bed you’ve crawled out of?’

‘One day yours.’ Craig hugged her anyway.

‘Honey,’ Monet said, trying to push the cowboy with blonde curls away, ‘they’ve already written our lives on the pub’s bathroom wall, let’s not add to that chapter.’

‘Yeah, it’d ruin a beautiful friendship.’ But he still hugged her again.

‘You know the rule, I never sleep with my friends,’ she said, stepping away from the serial-hugger. Monet

might not have many rules, but the few she had, she lived by. 'What's happening with Sandy?'

'I'm taking him to Mum's, after we convince the flying vet to fly us home.'

'Good. Thanks for doing that for me.'

'Only for you.' Craig smiled, giving her a wink as he filled up the kettle.

Rigsy barrelled in with a swag over his shoulder, dumping his duffel bag by the rattly fridge. He dragged his esky from the empty space where the stove used to live and started loading it up with ice. 'I've got beef for Mum, beer for me—'

'What about the Inn?' Craig asked, flicking on the electric kettle and reaching for a mug.

'We never lock the back door, because the Unofficial Elsie Creek Inn never closes.' Monet stuck a large laminated notice on the fridge, and one for each side of the back door. It was the same message as always:

Management is unavailable.

Please help yourself and leave the door unlocked.

Any gold coin donations for power & coffee is much appreciated.

X M A S D U S T

Any issues, email or radio Monet

(WWWW1)

Monet put out large tins of coffee, tea, sugar and boxes of UHT milk on the bench to keep the guests happy. As there was no stove, that was as far as her housekeeping went. Guests brought their own linen in the way of a swag, and a towel. Plus, they were all well trained to never enter through the front door, herself included.

'Take care, Craig. Say g'day to your mum for me.' Monet scooped up Rigsy's duffel and her backpack and followed Rigsy, carting his esky and swag out the door.

'Will do,' said Craig, waving with his coffee mug. 'Try to be good, if you can.'

'And ruin my reputation?'

'The Station Hand calls you Little Miss Trouble,' Rigsy said over his shoulder.

'True. I forgot who I was talking to for a second.' From the back door step, Craig gave his wide sparkly smile as he stirred his coffee and tapped the spoon on the lip of the mug. 'Ring me if you get into the type of trouble you can't handle, and I might even put my beer down for a bit to make the hike out to Rigby Downs. I might even take you

out on a date, eh?’

‘What?’ Rigsy said, ‘You pair don’t date anyone.’

‘What is this strange ritual you call dating?’ Monet asked, dragging her backpack down the cracked driveway. ‘Is that what you do, when you’re not playing couch-surfing cowboy?’

‘Hey, I’ve graduated to a proper bed in my room, thank you very muchly.’ Rigsy loaded the gear into the rear tray of his Holden Kingswood ute. It was so old there was more grey undercoat patching the vehicle than maroon paint.

‘You know, if you want to keep your room at this fine country Inn permanently, just put a lock on the door.’

‘Like you, who’s never here?’

Monet shrugged, opening the creaky passenger door.

Through the ute’s windscreen, she peered at the massive tree towering overhead, with its leaves all shiny from last night’s rain. Its thick limbs stretched over the elevated colonial house. Its sturdy trunk stood as the centrepiece of the patchy back lawn that ran through to the stables where scattered utes and horse floats were parked nearby. All would be gone by mid-morning.

It all made up the unique charm of The Unofficial

Elsie Creek Inn that was a regular stop for many coming to town. It was meant to be her home—the place she was always leaving behind.

Down the cracked concrete driveway, passing the mighty well-lit pub, they turned onto Main Street.

‘Who flicked the switch on this place? I need my sunnies,’ Monet mumbled, wincing at the multi-coloured, strobing lights crowding the deserted main street of Elsie Creek. ‘I think there’s a song about wearing sunglasses at night?’

‘That might be a name for a new playlist—*Bloody hell!*’ Riggy slammed his foot on the brakes. ‘Cecil, you need a set of flashing lights to warn us of your wide load,’ he shouted to the short black water buffalo that was standing in the middle of the road, wearing a slouchy Santa hat and tinsel around his horns.

‘I’ll get him.’ Monet grabbed one of the muesli bars from her bag and approached the buffalo. ‘Dude, they freaking elfed you!’ An over-fed, walking elf. He didn’t compare to the many outback elves, made from red-dirt ant mounds wearing Santa hats like Swedish Tomte statues spotted in various roadside paddocks around town.

Cecil’s clip-clopping hoof steps echoed off the

deserted street as Monet led him to the safety of the sidewalk. Every store window was flashing its own set of bad 80s disco lights—it was enough to give her a migraine.

She straightened the tinsel around Cecil's wide horns as he chomped loudly on the muesli bar like a stranded spectator waiting for the Christmas street parade to start. 'Lucky you're not a reindeer. You'd be forced to wear this crap all year round and jam up my flying space.'

'So says the grinch,' called out Rigsy over the roof of his car, his wide toothy smile yellowed by the one and only flashing set of pedestrian lights. 'Mrs Sternston won best window display this year. It looks good, huh?' He pointed to the brightest window on the street. It was as if someone had stolen the centre of the sun.

'She had inside help, you know that?'

'Are you saying Mrs Sternston cheated? She's gotta be over eighty, or did Tess and those lush legs of hers sway the judges?' He sighed with a goofy grin, his teeth and the whites of his eyes now a hellish red under the lights.

Monet winced against the brightness of the craft store window that sat next to the post office. Slashes of red and white were everywhere. Big red ribbons, a white tree, stuffed animals and towering candy canes. 'Mrs Sternston

pays Kat to do her window display. She used to do the big department store windows in the city as a part-time job,' Monet said, climbing back into the ute.

Rigsy steered them down the main street's clash of brightly coloured lights, reflecting off the wet road. 'How do you know?'

'Kat told me last night.'

'When did you hold a conversation with your singing partner? In between dancing on the bar? You were crazy last night.'

'What's new.' Everyone called her crazy.

'You were crowd surfing with cowboys as if it was your own personal rock concert.'

Her grin grew. 'I'd forgotten about that. We had a mosh pit in the pub.' *Good times.*

'I'm surprised the publican didn't ban you,' said Rigsy. 'You, Kat and the rest of that softball crew were kamikaze karaoke queens last night. D'ya reckon the publican will make karaoke a permanent fixture?'

'Hope not. Some of those cowboys' yodels set off the cattle dogs in the car park.'

'But what a night.'

'Are you sober enough to be under the limit to drive?'

'Are you right to fly?' Rigsy asked, pulling up at the darkened airfield.

'Always.' She jumped out and grabbed her backpack.

'Call me if you need any help at Rigby Downs.'

'I'll be right. Safe trip, young man, and say hello to those that are worth talking to.'

Monet waved Rigsy off at the town's small airport, then flicked on her portable lamp and smiled wide as she approached her pride and joy. The Cessna C206 single engine Stationair.

'Good morning, Gertrude.' Monet patted her red six-seater plane, gliding her hand along the wing like a rider stroking their beloved horse.

She stored her backpack in the cargo hatch. The image of a straw broom stretched along the plane's underbelly, its glitter glimmered in the torchlight. She removed the tie-downs from under the wingspans and the chocks from the wheels, then went through her pre-flight checklist under torchlight.

'She's good to go, kid,' hollered Mickey, wiping the sweat from his brow with a grey hand towel that matched the colour of his coveralls and thinning hair. He cruised up in his nifty golf cart, loaded with spotlights, dragging a

trailer of boxes and scales.

‘Of course she would be, especially after she’s been tickled by Mickey the Master of all things Mechanical.’ But she still checked it over for peace of mind.

A small white ute pulled up beside them bearing the Australia Post emblem on the doors. ‘Morning,’ called out Tess, wearing green-and-red-striped stockings and red short shorts, with her post office shirt and a slouchy Santa cap. ‘We had some rain last night, huh?’

‘It’s the wet season, it’s meant to rain,’ mumbled Mickey.

‘Well, that explains why I have a floor full of stockmen at the Inn this morning,’ Monet said, grabbing a postal sack from the back of Tess’s ute.

‘Aren’t you a bit tall to be an elf?’ Mickey asked, gazing up at Tess, who ran the family post office that was part of the town’s very busy craft store.

‘Did Tess steal your job?’ Monet grinned as she weighed the postal sack, eyeing Tess. ‘You got attacked by your grandmother, huh? We even stopped and perused her store window display while sharing brekkie with Cecil this morning.’

‘Bloody pest that beast is,’ mumbled Mickey.

'Who, Tess's grandma?'

'What? No, I meant—' Mickey wagged his stubby finger at Monet. 'It's too early for your cock 'n bull sass, kid.'

Monet's grin grew as she loaded the bag into the belly of her own beast. 'You look great, Tess.' The woman had the kind of legs that stopped all conversations in the pub, just so the men could watch her walk by.

'Thank you. Grandma made us all outfits this year. She was hoping to do sugarplum fairies, but there are enough tutus running around town now as it is.'

'All I see is bloomin' toddlers in tutus,' grumbled Mickey, weighing another sack before he passed it to Monet.

'I can get you one, so you don't feel left out?' Monet hid her grin, avoiding Mickey's death-glare deepening the creases around his eyes. She loaded the coarse off-white mail sack into her plane's cargo hold. The fancy term was LMB, locked mail bag, and there was one for every cattle station and outstation Monet was expected to visit today.

Tess grabbed another sack from the back of the ute. 'The radio is predicting a cyclone for Christmas.'

'Karma said so at the pub last night,' said Mickey, taking the bag from Tess. He weighed it then passed it on to

Monet to load into the plane. Monet then made notes on her tablet of the cargo's weight, working out her order of delivery. Their loading procession was like a fine-tuned factory line.

'Karma is a crocodile, they don't speak,' said Tess. 'And he's getting fat, the way you mob of men keep feeding him.'

'But he's happy in his custom-made pen,' said Monet, as she strapped down the cargo net over the freight, closed the hatch and started filling up the next compartment. With the bookings she had in freight, her plane had no room for passengers today. 'Why do these bags smell of Kat's candles?'

'How do you know they're Kat's candles?'

'Because Lucy made me do Kat's candle-making class with her. Which I noticed you weren't at.' Monet grinned at Tess.

'I don't do craft,' scoffed Tess. 'And like you, I don't cook either.'

Monet rolled her eyes. 'Just because the Inn doesn't have a stove, doesn't mean I can't cook. I just never follow the recipes.'

'Story of your life, eh, kid? Always chuckin' away the

rule books,' said Mickey, winking at her as he passed her a stack of boxes.

Monet lived by her own rules, and that's all that mattered to her.

'How come there is no stove at the Unofficial Elsie Creek Inn?' Tess asked.

'Some cowboy wanted to cook steaks late after the pub closed one night and forgot to turn it off. Burnt the pan dry, set the stove on fire, and nearly took the whole place with it. It was so old I never bothered to replace it and the guests don't miss it.' Monet certainly didn't miss cleaning it.

'So, is everyone getting candles for Christmas?' Her plane smelled of waxy vanilla, jasmine, and citronella.

'You, no,' said Tess, holding out a small box. 'It's the last box left in town.'

'Yesss!' Monet hugged the box of red and white candy canes. The spearmint hard candy was the only thing she liked about Christmas. 'I'm going to name my next playlist after you, Tess. What do you think about sunglasses?'

'I don't, unless I'm looking for some to hide me from the sun.'

A sweep of lights caught their attention as the police

highway pursuit car approached.

'Morning, Marcus,' they chorused to the sergeant.

'Morning. I bring coffee and Christmas cupcakes from Lucy, for the pilot and the stations you're visiting,' said Marcus. His police uniform highlighted his solid muscular build as he slid a cardboard box onto the plane's steps. He side-glanced at Tess with her long legs. 'Aren't you kinda tall to be an elf?'

'She's a vertically enhanced new breed of Elf, Sarge,' said Monet as Mickey chuckled beside her. 'You missed the memo, huh?'

'Tess, when are you going to put my poor constable out of his misery and say yes to dating him?' Marcus asked, grabbing his gear from the highway patrol car. 'He's driving us nuts at the station.'

Monet opened her mouth.

'Don't you add fuel to that fire,' said Marcus, arching an eyebrow at Monet.

'I was actually going to side with you, Marcus,' she said, scrambling up her plane's ladder.

'That'd be a first,' mumbled Mickey, passing her the final box. 'You agreein' with a coppa? Are you crook, kid?'

'I'm fine,' Monet said, tucking the boxes away inside

the cabin, she then tightly strapped down all her freight.

Jumping out into the muggy early morning air, her boots barely missed the puddle reflecting the lights from Mickey's nifty buggy. With tablet in hand, sipping her coffee, she completed her fuel and weight calculations from the back of Mickey's modified golf buggy.

'Is your flight plan ready?' Marcus came alongside her and unrolled his map, firing up his tablet.

'I'm emailing it to you now.' Monet pointed to his map and explained, 'I'll be over these stations on the north-west, with ten scheduled stops on my way to babysit Rigby Downs.'

'Oh, how is Tim?' Tess asked. 'I haven't seen him in ages, not since...'

No one had. 'Tim usually visits his mum's side of the family in Esperance for the summer.'

'How long are you staying at Rigby Downs for?' Marcus asked.

'I'll be back a few days after New Year's, unless Tim wants to extend his holiday and hang on the beach a bit longer. Are you having any time off, Sergeant?'

Marcus scoffed. 'Christmas is my busiest time, breath-testing and setting speed traps. Can you do a flyover on the

Sandlots? We've heard little from the guy since his wife left.'

'Sandlot Sandy is on the floor of the Unofficial Elsie Creek Inn as we speak. Cowboy Craig told me this morning he's taking Sandy to his mum's for Christmas. Then, we've got Riggsy, who's booked himself in to give Sandy a hand after New Year, until the musters start.'

'Good, that's everyone on the list accounted for.' Marcus tapped the details into the spreadsheet on his tablet. He then pointed to the map's sub-arterial dirt roads that led to town. 'Can you do a road report on the crossings in this region?'

'Sure. Anything else you want on that shopping list? Want me to fetch you some croissants from Katherine, or do a fish count on the billabongs? I haven't done a pizza delivery in a while, or—'

'Just radio through if there are any issues.' Marcus rolled up his map and craned his neck at the purple skyline, laden with grey clouds. 'Weather's getting crappy, there's a low brewing off the coast. Do me a favour and keep the two-way on at the station.'

'You check-in with me at least once a day, kid,' Mickey said.

'I'll be fine.' Monet tucked her tablet under her arm, then shut and double-checked the hatches were locked for take-off. 'Gertrude and I are looking forward to this holiday.'

'What the hell!' Marcus scowled with his coffee cup frozen halfway to his mouth as the sunrise lessened the shadows over the town.

'Oh, no,' Mickey mumbled, raising his grey eyebrows as he stared in the same direction as Marcus.

'What?' Monet asked from the steps of her plane.

'The roof painter got the police station.' Tess pointed to the far end of the runway where the hospital's helipad stood between the outback town's police and fire station.

There was a red cross on the roof of the hospital. A Dalmatian peeing on a red fire hydrant lived on the fire station's roof. And the cop shop had... 'What is that?' Monet asked.

'It's a strong arm holding back a masked burglar carrying a sack. It reminds me of a retro bad guy comic scene,' explained Tess. 'It's very cliché.'

Mickey snort-laughed. Marcus's scowl deepened. And Tess giggled behind her hand.

'It's the long arm of the law!' Mickey let out a

whopping big belly laugh, wheezing for air.

‘Not funny,’ said Marcus with a frown.

‘They tagged the cop shop.’ Monet aimed her camera’s phone at the art work that covered the entire roof of the cop shop. The image was too dark and fuzzy for her phone to capture. ‘It’s not light enough for me to post to my Instagram.’

‘How many roofs has that tagger graffitied now?’ Tess asked.

‘Too many, but I’ll find out who it is.’ Marcus heaved open his driver’s door with his eye on the station’s roof. ‘Safe flight, Monet. Stay out of trouble, and do a radio-check with Mickey once a day.’

‘Not making any promises.’ To behave, or make a promise she’d never keep.

‘Reckon he’ll fingerprint it?’ Mickey asked as they watched the cop car race to the station.

Monet shrugged.

‘My grandmother loves the snail on the post office roof,’ said Tess. ‘Molly loves her retro woman in curlers so much she wants to refurbish the hairdressing salon to match it. What’s your favourite roof painting, Mickey?’

Mickey used his hand towel to dab at the beads of

sweat building between the ruddy white whiskers on his top lip. 'I like the Mad Hatter's tea party over the train station the most. It's really clear from the sky.'

'You must take me up again after the Christmas rush is over,' Tess said to Monet.

'Anytime. You don't need an invitation to come party on my mail-run—you are the Post Mistress.' Monet checked her watch, keen to keep her schedule. She had lots of stops to make as the last freight run before Christmas. 'Mickey, the Inn is yours if you get into a bother with your brother.'

'She'll be right, kid. Billy's got us havin' Christmas tucker at the pub with the publican, this year.'

'Just don't play cards together.'

'We don't play, we cheat.' Mickey chuckled, giving her a salute.

She closed her door and pulled the safety lever on the airlock tight. From the windows she waved at Tess, who tooted as she drove back to town. Mickey rolled off in his nifty golf buggy, towing the trailer back to the hangar.

'Gertrude, it's time to get this party started.' Headphones on. Strapped into the familiar mould of the lamb's-wool seat cover. Monet flicked her fluffy dice with the Chinese good luck charm hanging from her rear-view

mirror. It was all part of her routine to finalise her cockpit pre-flights checks. She put her tablet in its cradle, with her flight schedule and music ready to start at the push of a button.

The aviation lights came on, reflecting an eerie glow off the wet tarmac.

She started her engine, watching the propeller spin until it became invisible and that's when Gertrude purred.

Monet settled back into her seat, feeling the red plane's rumble as the adrenalin rose.

'Gertrude, let's fly away and leave all our troubles behind us.' They taxied down to the edge of the freshly swept runway that Mickey fastidiously kept clean from any foreign debris, where the white line disappeared on the edge of the wilderness.

Mickey waved from his office doorway, saving her the hassle of radioing the control tower. Above his office roof stood the telecommunications tower, with its top lights lost in the colours of the sunrise creeping along the outback's horizon.

Monet pulled back on the yoke, doing the delicate dance with the pedals, and the roaring plane powered down the white line. Pushing against the mild g-force, she

embraced its power.

Wheels off and Gertrude climbed up and over the outlying scrublands that stretched on forever.

This time of year, Elsie Creek was a lazy loping river, with plenty of run under the bridge. It's exposed soft sandbank was a landing bay for the many fishermen and their boats near the town's busy boat ramp.

A lonely set of car lights raced down the Stuart Highway towards Alice Springs. She guessed it was Riggsy cruising down the grey road with the parallel train tracks running alongside. Both road and rail line disappeared on the curve of the horizon.

She banked left to swing wide around the town of Elsie Creek. At the end of the airstrip was the town's first responders' region nestled next to the small country hospital. To the left of them ran the town's main street, aglow with its gaudy flashing red, green and white lightshow.

The roof of the Elsie Creek Tea House came into view. Nearby Lucy's coffee van shone with its tasteful display of fairy lights that spread over the train station's lawn area, where tradesmen, miners, and cattlemen waited in line for their breakfast and coffee. Nearby was the fire chief's

vehicle, facing the small-town park that sat opposite.

Over the road stood the mighty Elsie Creek pub, with its lights that were never switched off. Next door was the enormous tree that overshadowed the Unofficial Elsie Creek Inn.

‘See ya when I return,’ Monet whispered to the Inn below.

She then flicked on her music, loud, and didn’t look back. Her eyes were always kept on the sky ahead. There were a lot of stations to visit before she was wheels down and feet up, to relax these next few weeks in peace and solitude where she would miss Christmas altogether.

She could hardly wait.

TWO

From the pilot's seat, Monet bellowed along with the brassy Elle King's Ex's & Oh's as she flew over the top of Rigby Downs. She used to love visiting this station to catch up with Jack Kirby, but most of all, his son Tim.

It'd been a long time since she'd been here.

Never as a guest.

She followed the road from town that ran like a jagged red pencil line, leading to a scattering of sheds and cattle yards, which made up only a part of the sprawling homestead. Horses and cattle roamed in paddocks coated in lush, deep green grass that stretched all the way to the

purply haze in the sky. Rivers sparkled like glittery rolls of rope. Dams lay as the centre of hand-drawn child-like flowers, with cattle tracks forming the petals and stems.

She buzzed over the airstrip, searching for hazards among the silvery green scrublands shading the red dirt. Cattle and wallabies loved to wander onto the runway. Today it had been wild donkeys and feral buffalos that caused her to quickly cancel her landings, only to herd them away from her flight path to then try again.

Wheels down, the plane skidded on the slushy gravel, but Monet was ready for it. She knew how to slide her way out of any runway party, flying to outback locations long before she was old enough to get a car licence.

Following the fast-moving monsoonal storms, she'd been landing in sticky clay pans for most of the day. It was like skiing down a snow-covered hill, with mud and clay flicking under the wheels, sticking to the plane's body. It was that or the washed-out, rocky roads complete with water-filled corrugations that made her bones rattle and arms ache as she fought the yoke to keep control.

At the runway's end, she turned the red Cessna back towards the small tin shelter that was the gateway to Rigby Down's station.

Normally there would be some sort of a welcoming party.

Most places she'd flown into, the owners greeted her in their mud-splattered vehicles. They'd done their best to clear their sunburnt airstrips for her, many had even mowed it for the occasion.

Here, there was no ute filled with yapping cattle dogs to meet her. No hearty wave from suntanned kids wearing big smiles. No nod from the cattleman's Akubra, or hugs from the wife and station cooks.

There was no one.

Each landing had filled her cramped cabin with humidity, only this time Monet didn't mind. She was simply relieved to be free from the roller-coasting rodeo ride she'd been on all day due to the stormy turbulence. It would have had the bronco rodeo champion, Cowboy Craig, yahooing over the headsets with his hand waving in the air, counting down for the eight seconds.

A weighty silence replaced the engine and music. After hours of plane noise, it was always a jolt to her system.

'Well, Gertrude, we're here.'

She climbed out of her seat, through the back, now empty except for her luggage and personal freight. Lugging

back the lock, she jumped out, her boots landing heavily in the soggy soil.

The humidity hit her like steam churning from a bucket of cold water added to a sauna, causing her pores to open and the sweat to start. Cicadas screeched as the hot breeze shifted the leaves of the smooth-barked salmon gums and other native eucalyptus trees. Heat waves shimmered over the runway and along the red dirt track leading to the farmhouse.

The late afternoon sun pierced through the cloud cover to bite at her skin as she grabbed her water bottle, searching for any sign of life. There wasn't even a sign to say she'd landed at the right station.

'Welcome to Rigby Downs.'

It'd been a long day that officially didn't stop until she had unpacked her freight and perishables. Some days she wished Gertrude was a helicopter; they were much easier to park and to just drop and stop.

But Monet wouldn't swap Gertrude for anything.

Patting the plane's side like it was a steed, she said, 'I'll be right back to unload and put you to bed, Gertrude.'

She grabbed her backpack and hat, and with her aviator sunglasses shading her eyes, she headed down the

dirt track.

Nope, this wasn't some episode of *Farmer Wants A Wife* where the willing women were made to walk to the homestead, when Monet knew the farmer was away. Maybe she could start her own YouTube channel on the many ways to keep entertained while housesitting a station?

Her boot stride was steady; she was used to hiking toward homesteads, mining offices or outstations.

As the golden glow of sunset stretched above the crest in the road, she spotted a shiny new shed roof. 'Impressive.'

Tim must've finished the shed his dad always wanted, or maybe it was a horse jumping arena for the new lady of the manor?

At the edge of the homestead Monet stopped in the shade of an overhanging ghost gum. She dug around in her backpack's front pocket, shoving aside her muesli bar stash for buffalos until she found another food source. She then gave a low whistle and waited.

Seconds later, a barking blue cattle dog came tearing down the dirt driveway kicking up dust.

'Hey, Bandit. Just me, mate.' She tossed the dried meat morsel to the dog who stopped short to sniff warily at

the meat, then her.

But then it was like flicking on a light switch when the dog remembered her. His stocky blue body moved with the wild whip of his wagging tail as she ducked from his eager tongue-kisses. The black mask-like colourings around his eyes only highlighted their shine.

‘Nice to see you too, Bandit.’ She patted his coarse fur, giving him another treat as she inspected her surroundings. The sheds were closed, the cattle yards were barren, and the stables were empty shadows. She heard chooks, a few wild birds, and that was it.

She’d been told there was only the one dog. Even so, she searched, always wary when first approaching any station because there was always a dog on duty—and cattle dogs were the worst for sneaking up behind you.

‘Come on, Bandit, escort me to the front door.’

Her canine companion trotted beside her wearing a wide smile.

The grand house stood on a small crest, with its deep shady verandahs and rows of solar panels glinting in the sunlight.

It used to be a place of sumptuous patio furniture and pots of lush ferns. They would hang among Mrs Kirby’s

collection of wind chimes that used to tinkle with the breeze. It was the perfect place for Monet to read during her summer stays.

But all of the patio furniture was gone. There were no wind chimes. Only a few pots remained, containing nothing but dirt the colour of ash.

Dust lay so thick over the concrete her boots left tracks beside Bandit's paw prints. The fancy French doors were held open by beer boxes filled with empty cans, dumped in a haphazard pile.

She wasn't expecting the place to be open.

She was meant to be home alone.

Stepping inside, she paused at the sound of someone snoring.

Removing her sunglasses, her eyes adjusted to the dim lounge room light. Over half of the furniture was gone, exposing dusty wooden floor panelling. The fancy furnishings that could almost be classed as antiques were replaced with more beer boxes and empty cans. Taking up the wall, was a wide-screen TV playing test cricket.

On the couch, snoring his head off, was the owner. Timothy Kirby.

And her heart just froze.

Oh hell, no!



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