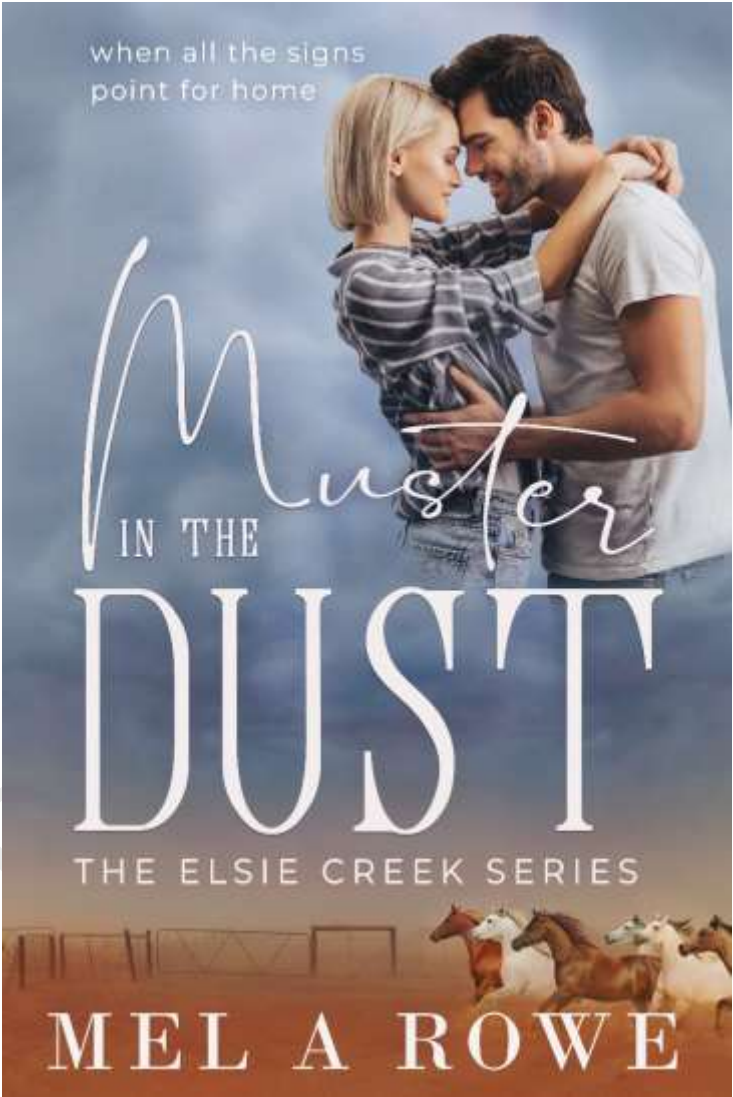


when all the signs
point for home



Muster
IN THE
DUST

THE ELSIE CREEK SERIES



MEL A ROWE

MUSTER
IN THE
DUST

MEL A ROWE

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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.

O

It was a freaking living nightmare! Her back muscles cramped as her arms trembled under the strain. Covered in dust and soaked with sweat, her work shirt stuck to her skin while pools of perspiration welled in the fingertips of her long-sleeved rubber gloves. And all she could do was hang on and pray this would work.

The outback's sun streamed over the endless land that made up Avallon Downs station. With only her horse for company, a herd of cattle meandered in the wide paddock of dry grasses, red dirt, and olive-leaved trees.

A distant grumble of thick thunderheads hung on the horizon, teasing of rain, it was a sure sign the dry season was ending. It only made Mandy bite down harder. Time was running

out. They had musters to finish before the rains began.

An echoing eerie shriek caught her attention. It came from the scavenger kites circling above her. They were a bad omen in this situation.

But she wasn't going to quit. Not now.

She ever so gently tugged on the small hind legs, as the mother's belly shuddered to push. At long last, and in a sudden rush, the calf was free.

Sprawled on her back in the dirt, she giggled as she stared into the big beautiful brown eyes of a bleating calf.

Suddenly, a towering shadow blocked the sun. 'Get off the ground, girl. You're not a feral camp dog.' Her father frowned at her from high in his saddle.

Crawling on her denim knees, Mandy helped the little guy over to his mother. The bond was instant.

'Why aren't you mustering over on the east side?'

'I was ... I am. The stockmen are handling it. I spotted this mother struggling.' She smiled with sheer joy at the scene of the mother and suckling newborn, who was wagging his skinny tail. She wanted to hug the world.

Even though she was a filthy mess, she didn't care. All she

saw was the precious gift on four wobbly little legs, voraciously slurping milk from his mother.

‘Dad, look at him.’ Mandy stripped off her gloves, then washed her hands and sweaty face.

Her father climbed off his horse, the sturdy steps of his Cuban-heeled boots stirring up the red dust. On his hip, a coiled stockwhip swung from its tethered position on his second belt, alongside the shotgun shells. With a gloved hand he poked up the brim of his black Akubra and frowned as he crouched near the calf.

For a man who communicated by frowning, this was a scowl Mandy had never seen before.

‘Do you see it, Dad?’ She squatted beside him, her grin growing. Happy tears streamed down her dirty cheeks as she hugged her knees. Pure joy bubbled inside her chest. She wanted to fling her arms high in the air and dance in the dust, but never in front of her father—or anyone else for that matter.

But she’d done it!

This scrubby outback kid, living in a man’s world, may have just helped to birth a champion.

Dustin leaned in closer to inspect the animal. The calf kept

on feeding, ignoring them all, while the mother looked on with widening eyes.

'Shh,' Mandy said soothingly to the cow she had been watching over since dawn.

'You baby this herd.' Dustin's permanent frown faltered long enough to give her the slightest nod.

That was as close as she ever got to a pat on the back from her father.

Her rust-coloured stallion, Scrapper's Son, emitted a low whinny as she reached out and stroked his long nose. He'd been grazing nearby the entire time.

With a smile, Mandy wiped the dust and happy tears from her face as she gazed over the paddock she managed, which held over a thousand head of cattle.

'What do you think, Dad?' She spun around to face him, but her father was already walking away.

Effortlessly Dustin Must climbed into the saddle, then lowered the brim of his Akubra to shade his squinty eyes. 'I've received word ...' He exhaled deeply, his strong chest and shoulders sinking, as he gathered up the reins and nudged at his horse. Dust kicked up from its hooves. 'Your mother died. You can tell your sister.'

1

Six months later ...

To love and loathe your sister in one heartbeat should be impossible—yet it was the blinding truth in this harsh sunburnt land, where Mandy tried to smother her emotions and focus on the biggest sign in town. Its towering shadow stretched across the cracked tarmac like a black, bottomless billabong.

Except for the main highway, the sign displayed the names of five main roads that led to Aboriginal communities and cattle stations. Beside each name was the blazing red sign proclaiming all those roads were CLOSED.

Assorted parked cars, trucks, utes, and road trains lined the roads. There were no parking spots available, so Mandy squeezed

her horse truck in behind her dad's ute, which was wedged between a tree stump and the sign.

She pulled on the truck's handbrake, its familiar hiss had her shoulders sagging with relief. The roads had been passable, but rough. Now that the monsoonal rains had moved on, the rivers were quickly returning to creeks, leaving large muddy ruts in the road.

In front, the Toyota ute's door swung open as Dustin Must slung on his sweat-stained Akubra. He tugged at the waist of his dark denim jeans then brushed down his town shirt, tucking the tail in, then straightening his good belt. Even his bespoke Cuban-heeled RM Williams boots got a polish, but his wide-brimmed Akubra was the same one he wore every day.

Squinting through the sun's rays, he gave a short, sharp nod to Mandy as if to say, *well-done, you didn't kill the horses driving them into town*. Then he swivelled back to stare up at the massive road sign.

Mandy slipped on her own Akubra before sliding out of the truck, then peeked into the back where the horses waited to be unloaded.

That's what she'd rather be doing, except her father had to

stop at this dumb road sign first. Every time.

Welcome to Elsie Creek.

'Only be a minute, Scrapper. You play nice with Tamino,' she said to her proud stallion, who snorted his impatience.

With her back to the town, Mandy eyed the road rolling ahead of her like a black carpet to the wherever of never-never. Used to the red dirt and black soil plains, it was an oddity to hear her boots echo on the tarmacked road.

She wiped at the gritty layer of dust on her cheek then straightened her T-shirt, trying to look presentable. Coming back to town was always a culture shock. Only this time there was no sister to lean on. *Damned sister.*

'G'day, Dustin,' said Billy, the long-time local who lived and worked at the pub, waiting in the sign's shade. He thumbed back the brim of his old-fashioned Sunday hat. A dark grey fedora with a pinched crown, where he'd tucked a spotted feather inside its matching ribbon. The hat matched his snappy suspenders and trousers, reminding her of a jazz trumpeter from the 1920s. He shifted a bouquet of sad daisies to his left hand, to shake her father's hand.

'Flowers for me, mate?' Dustin said.

'Nah, it's bribery.' Billy shared a warm, wrinkly smile with a trickster shine to his eyes while using the sad posy to swat away a fly. 'How's life at Avallon Downs?'

'Good. You and the publican busy?' Dustin pointed back to the mighty Elsie Creek Pub towering over the town's main intersection. Its car park was full of assorted utes, even though opening time was hours away.

'We're getting ready for the Cattlemen's Games. It's gonna be a cracker this year. We've got blokes coming from all over to participate. Don't worry, we've got your rooms ready. Station owners always get priority at the pub.'

'Thanks, Billy,' Mandy said, as she leaned her shoulder against the sign-pole, 'but I don't need a room. I'll be sleeping in the truck near the horses.'

'Your sister will need the room ...'

Of course, the pampered princess would!

'... and I'll be expecting you to shower and change in that room I'm paying for. Not in the back of the truck, young lady.'

Mandy ducked her head. She'd never talk back to her father ... Ever.

Clip-clop. Clip-clop.

They all turned to face the sound.

It came from the short, dumpy water buffalo waddling down the road. Pink and purple ribbons waved off his blunted horns as if he were leading some street parade. With trimmed polished hooves, Cecil's black coat glistened in the sun.

'Cecil, you've had a bath.' Mandy smiled at the animal who had stopped for a pat and ear scratch.

Her dad scoffed at the beast. 'Bloody pampered pet-meat.'

'Cecil's all primed to do his duty. Now all we need is that new ranger to come and do her thing.' Billy offered the limp posy to the water buffalo whose black eyes lit up like it had found gold.

With nostrils flaring, Cecil nose-dived into the white daisies. He snorted at the floral aroma before plucking daintily at the petals, chewing on them like a cow.

'You know you can search the 'net for this kind of information,' said Mandy.

'Hush, child.' Billy's wrinkles deepened across his brow. 'This is tradition.'

'That new ranger had better be checking out those stock routes properly,' Dustin said to Billy.

'I heard she's got the new fire chief on board.'

‘Why? Can’t the woman do her job?’

Mandy winced, ducking her head to hide her expression.

‘Who wants to pull out bogged cattle trucks, or grey nomad caravans as part of their daily duties?’ Billy then said, ‘Hey, I heard your head stockman retired over the summer.’

Dustin poked up his hat’s brim to rub at his forehead. ‘Yeah, poor Wazzer suffered a mild stroke.’

‘He’s okay, isn’t he?’

‘The doc reckoned he’ll make a full recovery. We were keeping his job for him until he was well enough to return, but he decided to retire early. He’s living with his son in SA.’ Dustin frowned at Mandy. ‘You’ve got Wazzer’s gear to drop off at the train station, right?’

‘Yes, Dad.’ It was on her long list of chores.

‘So, you’ll be looking for a new head stockman, then?’ Billy asked.

Mandy pursed her lips together. That job was hers.

‘Yep, I reckon so.’ Dustin gave his normal tight-lipped, curt nod.

Mandy turned her back on her father to face the small outback town. The soft breeze carried a rich roasted coffee aroma

emanating from the Elsie Creek Railway Station, where a sea of men in assorted cowboy hats lined up at the small food van. She could handle a coffee ... or three.

'Where's your sister, er which one is it?' Billy asked with a meek shrug

'Mindy. I'm Mandy. It's okay, Billy, happens all the time.' *Bloody sister.* Again, she ducked her head to hide the scowl that brought a heated flush to her face. With no head stockman, or little sister, to lend a hand it had been one dreadfully long hot summer at Avallon Downs.

'Min's been havin' a summer holiday down south,' mumbled Dustin. 'She's getting a lift back with Jacko, one of the crew.'

Mandy rubbed at her imaginary migraine. How the heck did her sister manage to get Jacko, the dreamiest dish to ever walk the soils of Avallon Downs, to drive her back to town? Four days of non-stop driving along the Stuart Highway, just the two of them.

The thought of spending one-on-one time with Jacko was a dream. And a nightmare. Unlike boy-crazy Min, who could out-talk a talk-back radio host, Mandy only had a limited library of

conversation topics: horses, cows, pasture, and occasionally the weather. That was it. Perfect for station life, but probably not what men wanted to hear from a girl. It's probably why she was treated like one of the guys—or friend zoned so many times she'd given up.

'Here she comes now,' said Billy.

'Who?' Mandy spun around, not expecting her sister until later today.

A haze of heat rose from the tarmac as the sun's rays spread over the road that led to Kakadu National Park, where a large four-wheeled drive ute approached. Its chunky tyres rolled over the curb to squeeze into the tiniest space beneath the large sign.

That had to be an illegal park.

Emblazoned on the beefy ute's sides were the official National Park Ranger emblems. Beside fuel drums, sturdy chains rattled over a cage on the back. Above them was a mesh rack that held two chainsaws, a solid axe, a pick, and assorted shovels. Her father kept the same equipment in the tool box on the back of his ute that Mandy used all the time.

In a khaki uniform with official logos on her sleeves, the ranger tossed her long thick plait over her shoulder. Under the

morning sun, her hair was the colour of satiny fire. 'Morning, Billy. Cecil. I see the crowd is getting bigger.' The new park ranger nimbly climbed onto the back of her ute and pulled out a long pole.

'Morning, Alice,' said Billy, tapping the brim of his Sunday hat.

The buffalo plucked at his daisies as Mandy craned her neck up at the tall sign blocking the rising sun where Alice flicked off three of the CLOSED signs.

That left two roads still to re-open, then the muster season could officially kick off, which didn't leave Mandy much time to prove herself.

'Is that all?' Billy called out.

'Looks like it.' Alice's sturdy hiking boots landed softly among the tiny blue wildflowers poking out among the crushed pebbles, gritty sand, and fine powdery silt that clumped together to make up this region's red soil. 'Until tomorrow, maybe.' She scooped up the CLOSED signs, slid them behind her car seat before driving away.

'Bugger. I really thought it was gonna be today.' Billy pulled out a thick chunk of street chalk from his pocket. 'Come 'ere,

Cecil.'

While the water buffalo chewed the last of his daisies, Billy wrote across Cecil's black furry side in white chalk: *3/5 roads open & the countdown continues ...*

Only two roads to go. Her heart hammered. Was she ready to do this?

'Off you go, mate, share the news.' Billy patted the pampered beast's generous rump. Cecil clip-clopped away with white daisy petals covering his black lips like confetti. 'I'll see ya same time tomorrow.'

'You'd better get those horses settled in,' Dustin said to Mandy as he watched the buffalo meander down the road. 'Then you can get a head start on the ordering too. I'll get our rooms sorted. Be there when the pub opens to the mob. And don't forget the paperwork, girl.'

'Yes, Dad.' On the outside she kept calm, but inside her stomach was churning like a cattle-truck trekking through the wet season roadside mud. Did she dare go against her father? What was she thinking?

The nerves were horrendous. Not eating or sleeping over a daring plan—that her father was going to hate her for.

She shuffled in her boots, so close to jumping back into her

truck to drive home.

When the sound of a throaty V8 engine caught her attention, as her father frowned at the foreign noise.

It came from an ancient, scrappy, maroon-coloured ute. The driver had his elbow leaning on the lip of the open window. It was Monet's cousin, Rigsy. She'd seen him around the train station stockyards. Like all the other stockmen, he had never looked at Mandy twice.

And that's how she liked it. She had too much work to do. Min was the star of their freaky sister sideshow, not her.

'What a heap.' Dustin's typical scowl deepened the crevices along his forehead. 'You'd think with the cyclone destroying their place, that drifter would've left town.'

Her jaw dropped. How callous could her father be? The poor guy had lost his home. Rigsy probably couldn't afford to leave in his scrappy ute that had chucked a tight U-turn, then rolled to a stop right behind her truck.

Oi! Now it was Mandy's turn to scowl. Not only did Rigsy block the road, but the prick had trapped her truck.

2

Rigsy peered across the bonnet of his HK Holden ute and grinned at Cecil the water buffalo waddling his wide load down the road.

But it was Billy, standing near the towering road sign beside a pair of cattlemen, who Rigsy was after.

The driver's door creaked as he lumbered out. Then, while tucking the tail of his crinkled work shirt into his dust-stained jeans, another button fell into his hand.

'Dammit.' He only had two buttons left on this shirt. The stupid nylon thread had melted in the outback summer heat.

He slid the button into his jeans pocket with the rest of his collection, making a mental note to sew it back on later.

Squinting against the sun, he raked fingers through his hair, feeling the dust. He should have grabbed his hat.

He stepped into the shade of the towering road sign, which

now declared three out of the five main roads open. Unfortunately, the two roads that remained closed were the main stock routes that everyone was counting on.

'You've blocked us in,' said Dustin Must, the crankiest cattleman in the district. 'My girl's got work to do.' He tossed his thumb at his daughter standing beside him, hiding beneath her hat's brim.

'I'll only be a second.' Rigsy then grinned at the man of the hour. 'Morning, Billy.'

'What can I do you for, young Rigsy?' Billy asked, looping his thumbs behind his snappy suspenders.

Rigsy rubbed the back of his neck where his work shirt's collar, stiff with dust and starchy sunshine, irritated his skin. He had to stop leaving his clothes in the ute, the heat was killing them. 'Old Flo needs a date.' And Rigsy needed to do a load of laundry.

Billy spluttered, as if choking on a mouthful of dust. 'What?'

'A date. For the Cattleman's Dance. Flo wants to go.'

'Can she dance with that foot of hers?'

'Sure, she can. Kind of.' Rigsy shrugged. He'd danced around the kitchen a couple of times with the old duck, but he

wasn't a dancing judge to know any different.

'Why don't you take Flo out, then? You're a single bloke.'

Being single suited him just fine. Rigsy was far too busy focusing on his future to get mixed up in that kind of mush. But this was different. 'I already volunteered to be her date, but Flo said no.'

'Good to hear Flo has standards,' grumbled Dustin Must. 'No decent woman would bother with dust drifters like you, driving beat-up bombs.'

Dust drifter? 'It's a vintage ute, mate, with only one other owner her entire lifetime. Do you know how rare that is?' Rigsy didn't need to impress the likes of Dustin Must. He needed to get Billy and his snappy suspenders to say yes. 'Flo said she wants to have a proper serious date with someone in her age group.'

Billy scoffed. 'She's flamin' twenty years older than me.'

'That'd make her a cougar and you the toy boy, huh?' How old was Billy, with his grey hair and wrinkles that were a huge part of his smile? Although he wasn't smiling right now.

A tinkling laugh carried on the morning's breeze and Rigsy cocked his head to the lady hiding beneath the brim of her Akubra. Her sweet little laugh only made him smile. Which one

of the 'Muster Sisters' was she?

'Come on, Billy,' he pleaded, 'I'll drop Flo off and you can meet her at the pub.'

'Ask someone else, I'm working.'

'You do know what work is, boy?' Dustin Must grumbled, again.

Ignoring the cranky cattleman, Rigsy said, 'Billy, you work the morning shift cleaning the pub before it's open. You'll have no problems going to bed early, which'll be the same time as Flo. Or with Flo.' He couldn't resist the jibe.

Billy scowled at him. Dustin Must remained as stony faced as Yoda on a good day. And a horse neighed nearby. But Rigsy had to grin at the sweet tinkling laughter coming from the cowgirl heading for the truck.

Everyone knew of the Muster Sisters, although he'd never officially met them, he wanted to. Especially the one walking away from him in the bootcut jeans that cupped her cute butt, the low-rise waist accentuating her lazy, loping hip sway. It was mouth-watering.

Dustin Must cleared his throat. 'Watch ya self, boy,' he snarled.

Rigsy could feel the cranky cattleman's steely stare aimed at his back with the force of a thousand Aboriginal hunting spears. Thankfully, he'd never mustered at Avallon Downs station, because its owner could suck the life out of the land he stood on.

It was a great reminder as to why he was daring to share the same space as Dustin Must. So he turned away from the sexy sheila to face the pub's yardie—the front bar cleaner and general dogsbody of the yard. It was a big pub with an even bigger yard, and everyone in town loved the yardie. 'Come on, Billy, you'll make an old lady's decade by taking her to the dance.'

Thwack! Billy snapped on his suspenders with a frown, which was nowhere near as fierce as stony-faced Dustin.

But Rigsy wasn't giving up. Flo needed this. 'Good man. I'll tell her yes, shall I.'

'I already told you, I'm busy.'

'Can you please move your ute, mate?' Her sweet voice was loud and clear with a no-nonsense tone to it.

It had Rigsy's attention.

'Oi, numbskull, you've blocked us in with your crappy ute,' said Dustin, stepping in so close Rigsy had to lean back. The cranky cattleman had a look that could snap solid steel fencing

poles like twigs.

‘Yeah, yeah, mate. Won’t be long.’ Rigsy wasn’t stopping and stepped around the Dark Lord in the Akubra. ‘Come on, Billy. I’ll even buy you a bottle of rum for being a good sport.’

‘You know, back in the day it was the bloke who asked the sheila out.’

‘Times have changed. ‘

‘Are you trying to play matchmaker, eh? Is dating the old dames your new full-time job?’

‘Er, no.’ Although Rigsy was chasing a full-time secret career, which is why he was here. ‘Come on, mate, all I’m trying to do is find Flo a date. One date. One night.’

‘Rigsy, why not make Flo a profile on one of those internet dating sites,’ Dustin’s daughter said. ‘After you’ve moved your ute. It’s blocking my truck and I’ve got some thirsty horses to unload.’

Hey, she knew his name.

Now, if only he could work out the name of the lady scowling at him. She looked like her father—only a trillion times prettier and nowhere near as scary.

‘Coming.’ He hated upsetting the ladies, especially Flo.

'Come on, Billy, please say yes.'

'I'm working at the pub that night.' Billy stepped over some low felled logs as he headed across the vacant lot. 'Ask my brother.'

'I already asked Mickey, the Master of all things Mechanical.'

'And?'

'He said no. Along with a whole string of colourful words that would send Flo into an early grave if she heard them.'

'It's just a date. It's not like he's gonna marry her.'

'Mickey swears dating interferes with his precious radio time. He also reckons it goes against his intricate lifestyle rules of being a bachelor. But, Billy, you've been married before.'

'And I'm divorced.'

'Come on, this is for Flo. She wants to get dolled up. Who knows how many more dances the lady has left?' Plenty more, he hoped, because Rigsy had a soft spot for the old duck.

'I already told the boss I'm working that night. But I'll ask later in the hardware store, see if the Triple Js wanna do it.'

Even though the Triple Js were a group of retired men who occupied their time by cheating at cards and gossiping about the

locals of this small town, this might work. 'You're a champion, Billy. Don't let anyone tell you any different. I'll tell Flo.' He gave a wide berth to Dustin Must, who was climbing into his ute only to scowl at Rigsy over the steering wheel.

Excuse me for breathing, mate.

'Allow me, miss.' Rigsy gallantly held open the truck's door and let the lady climb on board. What a view. Whoever invented denim jeans for women was a workingman's champion. 'It's Mindy, right?'

'Mandy.' She frowned down at him, slamming the driver's door shut.

'Sorry.' Great first impression, mate.

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MEL A ROWE



She's rodeo royalty. He's nothing but a drifter chasing a dream. So how much trouble can a fake date create in a town overrun with cowboys?

Daughter of a wealthy cattle station owner, Mandy is the wallflower who prefers to take care of her family, her herd, and horses. But when her father hires someone else to manage the station she was born to run, Mandy makes a plan to retaliate...

Rigsy only came into town to find a date for a friend—not get roped into a fake dating one of the famous Muster Sisters! Pretending to be in a relationship with the sweet-smiling stockwoman to help achieve his goals, seems simple enough. Yet with Mandy's father gunning for Rigsy to leave town, her scheme may be the only thing that can keep his hopes alive.

But when the couple's unexpected passions collide with their ambitions, they become rivals in the race for their individual dreams that could cost them everything—including each other!

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