


when it's time
to return home.



Revealed
IN
DUST

THE ELSIE CREEK SERIES



MEL A ROWE

ROLLED
IN
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 and cultural references are purely for fictional purposes only and not designed to offend any individual persons, culture, or religions implied.*

The Following Is Written in Australian English

ROLLED IN DUST

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.

1

On a sunburnt carpet of red dust, the little house clung to a rise that faced a whole load of outback nothingness. But that was insignificant compared to the overwhelming cornflower-blue sky. Que's neck ached at the impossible, endless sight of altitude.

The gravity was crushing.

It was a sky that towered over her tiny new house, exposing all its secrets under a sun that shone like a light bulb in a big blue ceiling. And with it, the wind whispered a dusty promise of a fresh new start ...

Welcome home.

Que wiped at the tears blurring her vision; her chest heavy with hope of a future, as her daughter, Billie, skipped towards the house. The little girl's laughter filled the air as her shoes crunched on the gravelly dried dirt that was a colourful mesh of soft creams,

pasty greys, and a bold and rich ochre red, all perfectly contrasting with that sky.

Where did she start with all this space?

'Will we stay here forever, Momma?'

'Forever is a long time, baby.' Que swore to never make promises of forever again. 'Let's just enjoy the moment and worry about tomorrow, tomorrow, baby.'

A chunky vintage red ute, with a meaty rumble to its engine, ambled along their dirt track, scattering dust behind it.

Red dust was everywhere. She could feel it between her fingers, leaving a layer across her skin like a diamond-fine sandpaper.

'Who's that, Momma?' Billie rushed back to grab Que's hand.

'I'm hoping that's the lady with the keys.' Her new house didn't have any security screens, no spotlights, no bars, no cameras. Just a wide wraparound verandah, and countless large windows. Except one tiny window. Why bother with a window at all?

The chunky Ford ute's doors opened and closed and two women approached.

'Hi,' the driver said. 'I'm Kat.' She tucked a loose auburn curl into her ponytail, then held out her paint-splattered hand.

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'You must be Que Lawsten.'

'I am, and this is Billie.'

'I'm Billie. I'm five, and I'm going to go to a proper school soon.' Billie shook Kat's hand like a businesswoman.

Don't grow up too fast, baby.

'I have a daughter, Kaytlyn, who's almost eight,' said Kat. 'She'd love to meet you.'

'See, Momma, I've got a new friend already.'

The other woman approached. 'Hi, Billie, I'm Karen and I have a boy, Levi, the same age as you. So that means you'll have two new friends when you start school.'

The kid gave a full-wattage smile that pronounced the gap of her missing tooth. 'When do I start school, Momma? Today?'

'How about we look at the house first?' Her own house. Wow.

'These are for you.' Kat held out a set of keys.

'Here, you can do the honours, Billie.' Her daughter clutched the keys as if they were the grand prize in life. 'You did the renovations, Kat?'

'I gutted the place. It was so small and poky, I had to open it up for the view, it was in desperate need of light.' Kat stroked the side of the house like it was alive. 'But with some fresh paint and new kitchen cupboards, it came up amazing. I didn't test out

the stove, or the fridge, but they seem to work.'

Que peered through the windows at the kitchen benches that begged with the potential to overcrowd them with appliances. It was like the house was all windows, with no garden, but a concrete path that led to a huge shed.

And. That. Sky.

'How come you bought this place without seeing it?' Karen asked Que.

'It was our game.' Billie's pigtails bounced as she jumped the steps to the wide verandah. 'Momma, I can roller-skate here.' Her blue eyes were as wide as chocolate-chip cookies.

'All the way around the house, baby.' It was on their wish list, along with a remote location, school, and a hospital. 'Hey, how small is the bush hospital?'

'If its anything major, they'll air vac you out of town,' replied Kat. 'The locals have a saying, *if in pain catch a plane.*'

'Let's hope that never happens.' Que knocked her knuckles across the wooden pylon that was one of many holding the verandah's roof. If one fell, would they all fall like a house of cards?

'Momma made the coolest house-hunting game everrr. She taped a map of Australia on the side of the Mighty T.'

'The what?' Karen asked.

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'Our trailer's nickname.' Que pointed to the huge caravan that always had her back. 'It was originally Trailer Trash, but some of the grey nomads found the name offensive.' Que shared a soft smile at the beast that was home.

'What else did you do with your house hunting game?' Karen asked Billie.

'Momma made me wear a blindfold, and I threw a ball of sticky tape at the map. Where it landed was going to be home. The Northern Territory. Here.' Billie stamped her little sneaker on the mat, and dust rose like a tiny cloud puff. 'Momma, should I take off my shoes? I don't want to dirty our new home.'

'We're good, baby. Go on, the house is all yours.'

'Aww, can I swap Billie for one of my seven boys?' Karen asked.

'Seven kids!'

'Eight. There's a little girl in the mix,' said Kat from the sidelines. 'That's why we call Karen *Supermom*.'

Billie rushed inside. Her shoes squeaked along the floorboards as she whizzed around the place like a rumbling metal ball inside a pinball machine.

'You know, you bought this the day it went on the market?' Kat said, 'I've flipped plenty of properties before, but never sold one this quick.'

'Right time, right place, I guess. What else can you tell me about the place?'

'Just that I bought it off my friend's father-in-law; he's semi-retired to Queensland. Karen, you know everything about everyone in Elsie Creek.'

'Do not.'

'Do, too. So, do tell.'

'Fine ...' Karen peeked through the open front doorway. 'I haven't been here since I was a kid. Alex's mother was friends with my mum, and Molly. Molly lives on the mango farm over there ...' Karen pointed across the expansive area that made up their driveway. 'Molly is our local hairdresser and owns the farm with her niece Verily. Verily is our softball coach. Her partner is Alex, and this was his dad Neville's house.'

'Huh.' Que had no idea who Karen was talking about. She couldn't see the neighbours' properties beyond all of that space. 'What was this farm for?' *Dirt.*

'Nothing. Neville and his son, Alex Landers, are truck drivers. They owned a few trucks, where that shed was used to drive his big trucks through it to work on the engines without unhitching his trailers.' Karen pointed to the massive open shed, with a high roof, that was big enough to park three trucks side by side. 'Neville's son, Alex, still drives trucks when he's not brewing

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beer or working the mangoes.'

'Verily drives them too,' said Kat. 'Don't freak out when you see their road trains, they're huge.'

From the front steps, Que couldn't see the road, hidden by scrub and tall grasses that swallowed her red dirt driveway to the outside world. But around the house it was just a lot of red dirt and spindly scrub. And that sky.

Was there such a thing as a sky phobia? Was it the opposite to claustrophobia, when feeling tiny with all this space?

Que needed to change the conversation, or they were going to hit the highway in search of some cityscape.

'What do you know about the rest of my neighbours?' A surprising question when Que had never cared about neighbours before.

'Well ...' Supermom Karen took a deep breath, while Billie ricocheted around the empty house, opening windows and doors. 'Like I said, down the road towards town is Alex, Verily and Molly. They're the best.'

'Ditto to that,' said Kat. 'They've gone to visit Alex's dad in Brisbane, to do some baby shopping and a brewery tour. I'll introduce you when they return. Do you play softball? We'd love an extra player.'

'I'll have a think about it after I've settled into the

neighbourhood.’ Team sports or functions with friends were unheard of in Que’s world. Did she dare take up the offer?

‘Across the other side you have Gary and Val Cromwell,’ said Karen, continuing her talking tour of the neighbours. ‘Their kids, Tommy and Maddy, catch the school bus that stops right out front.’

‘That’s handy.’

‘Oh, talking about neighbours ...’ Supermom Karen pointed to a large troop carrier coming up the dirt drive. ‘That’s Richard and Bertha Symes, they live on your left side.’

‘And they’re here because?’

‘They’ve been checking out the renovations. They’re really nice people,’ said Kat. ‘Bertha is the best baker. Can you cook?’

‘Barely.’ Que was barely keeping up with this conversation with a stack of neighbours’ names she’d never remember. ‘So everyone knows we were coming?’

Kat shook her head. ‘Don’t think so?’

‘Er, hello ...’ Supermom Karen waved her hands at Que like she was hustling some merchandise on late-night TV. ‘Are you kidding me. When I first heard Kat sold this place, all I wished for was someone with children.’

‘Is this the type of town no one can sneak into?’ How nosy were these people?

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'We get the occasional tourists on their way to Kakadu,' replied Kat, 'and they'll stop to see Karma.'

'Karma? Is that a witch doctor or a crystal carrying tarot reader?'

'The crocodile. Karma's famous, he lives at the pub.'

'A-huh?' Too many names. Too many quirks. And another round of fresh faces to meet. Should she bother to remember their names before she moved on?

Stop. Que exhaled the snark because she'd agreed to stop and be still for Billie. It was time to be civil and start making an effort—which meant meeting the neighbours.

Whipping on a smile, she approached the elderly couple climbing out of the beefy Landcruiser. 'Hello, I'm Que, I believe we're neighbours.'

'Richard and Bertha. Welcome to Elsie Creek.' Richard removed his enormous cowboy hat, before offering her a warm handshake.

'We've brought you a little something to welcome you to our town.' Bertha held up a large wicker basket, brimming with goodies. 'Some fresh eggs, bananas, mango chutney and banana bread.'

'It's the best banana bread in the district,' said Karen.

'And my tomatoes,' said Richard, sliding on his Akubra.

'I've got a bumper crop coming on this year.'

'You didn't have to do this.' The basket was heavy, as heavy as her heart. 'Thank you so much, it's very thoughtful.' And unheard of. *Wow, what a first impression.* Que felt like she was living in some sweet telenovela, that were known for jaw-dropping bombs to drop ... any minute now ...

'MOMMA!'

A dog barked.

'*Billie!*' Instantly, she dumped the basket onto the verandah and ran through the front door, into the large open room with the kitchen to her right. 'Where are you? Billie?'

She raced down the central corridor, which led to the bedrooms and bathroom. It ended at a large room of windows that exposed an even grander view of the property, where Billie pointed to the outside world.

'Are you okay?' Que scooped up her daughter, holding her against her hammering chest as she searched for her escape and security blanket, the Mighty T. But her fast getaway was blocked by the entire neighbourhood thundering down the corridor louder than a herd of elephants.

Oh wait, that was the adrenalin pulsing in her throat.

'What's wrong?' Que asked Billie.

'There's a thing in that pond. And a dog.'

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'Huh?' Que's fear melted away. 'What is that?'

Everyone stared through the wall of windows displaying a life-sized painting of that ginormous blue sky and olive-leaved trees that rolled like waves in the ocean. It was the open, endless outback. She'd never felt so small.

Richard slid open the glass door to the back verandah area, big enough for outdoor entertaining.

Meanwhile, Que walked backwards until she spotted the Mighty T, still attached to her four-wheel-drive, waiting like a trusty steed at the other end of the corridor. Maybe moving here was a bad idea.

'Oh, it's just Cecil,' Richard said, poking up the brim of his cowboy hat. 'And some dog. It looks young and it's lost its tail?'

'Is that doggie, okay?' Billie wriggled out of Que's hold to get to the ground.

'He looks like he could do with a decent feed, but okay, I guess. His friend there is Cecil. Now, he's the world's friendliest water buffalo. Do you want to meet him?' Richard held out his hand to Billie.

'Are you kidding? I have a dog, and a buffalo, in my backyard?' Que tightened her ponytail, desperate to get a grip.

'Cecil's doing what water buffaloes do, he's wallowing in your waterhole,' said Richard with a hearty chuckle. 'You'll need

to keep your front gate shut if you don't want him to come onto your property. But I'll go check out that dog for you.'

'I wanna see,' said Billie. 'Momma said we could get a dog when we moved in. Is he ours? Can we keep him, Momma?'

'It might belong to someone else, baby. Just don't go near that water. Or that dog. Or the big black lump wallowing in that water.'

'It's only a knee-deep puddle by the looks of it,' said Richard, trotting down the back steps with Billie hot on his heels. 'It'd be the leftover from the wet season rains, or you have a boghole.'

'So, I'll have waterfront views in the wet season, huh?' Weather Que had only read about.

'Don't we all.'

'Honey,' Bertha called to her husband. 'I think you need to tell Billie about the Billabong Bunyip.'

'Good idea, luv. Come on, Billie. Cecil won't hurt you; he loves kids. And by the looks of that pup, he likes kids, too.'

Que wanted to keep Billie at her side. She always kept Billie in her line of sight, except for that one time ... How was she going to cope with her baby going to school?

Yet to see the little girl take the hand of the elderly man made her tethered heart strings stretch to near breaking point.

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Already expanding her horizons, her baby girl was so trusting of strangers.

It was something Que had to relearn.

Taking a deep breath, she faced the three women on her back verandah. 'Can someone please explain what is a Cecil? And a Billabong Bunyip?'

'Cecil is a pet pygmy buffalo, although the men will tell you he's just short. He belongs to Esther,' said Karen. 'The kids feed him at school during lunchtime and they draw all over his back in chalk. Some days he's covered in flowers, or the new letter of the alphabet.'

'I've got stacks of chalk in the car I'll share with Billie,' said Kat. 'Look, hon, don't worry, I know exactly how you feel. Cecil scared me silly at first, but he's harmless. I used Cecil to help me propose to my husband.'

'A-huh?' Que tried to control her breathing, along with the urge to bundle up Billie and bolt for the Mighty T. But her daughter was all smiles, holding out her fingers to the muddy dog with no tail, who was cowering to meet them on the edge of the puddle.

'Cecil will easily fall in love with you if you feed him flowers and muesli bars,' continued Kat.

'As for the Billabong Bunyip,' said Bertha, a little breathless,

'it's a story we all tell the children to ensure they stay away from any of our waterways.'

'Are you okay, Bertha?' Que asked.

'Just catching my breath from that run down the corridor. I'm so unfit, and you run so fast.' Bertha patted her generous chest. 'I remember getting told about the Billabong Bunyip when I was little. I never went swimming anywhere after that. Still don't.'

'The Billabong Bunyip's scarier than crocodiles,' said Kat, with Supermom Karen nodding like a little girl with big eyes.

'Are there crocodiles in the water? We saw the warning signs at every creek crossing, which kind of sucked. There were some sweet spots we wanted to stop at.'

'Crocodiles are everywhere,' replied Kat. 'So don't go swimming anywhere unless it's a pool. You have a creek at the back.'

'I do?' Was she to expect some crocodile to bask beside the water buffalo right at her back door? Was it too late to ask for a refund?

'Which reminds me,' said Karen, turning to Bertha, 'We're organising a Mother's Day event to raise funds for a school swimming pool. I know it's two months away, but we're hoping you might bake some of your amazing banana bread?'

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'Every school mum has tried for decades now, it never happens. Pools are expensive to run, and you'll need lifesavers and everything.'

'But our grants guru up at the hospital—'

'Who?'

'Jenny, head nursing sister. She's amazing for internet shopping and for finding Government grants for our region,' explained Kat.

'What did Jenny find?' Bertha asked.

Que switched off as the women continued to talk about people she didn't know.

Her daughter and Richard stood at the edge of the muddy puddle, where the short, black, shiny-nosed water buffalo slogged his way out. He stared at them through long black lashes, chewing like a cow, with red ribbons wrapped around his curved horns like a maypole.

Billie's tiny hand patted the black sides of the buffalo, her laughter carrying across the parched soil. It was music that made Que smile. Every time.

'What do you think, Que?' Karen asked. 'Can you help with the school fundraiser?'

'I haven't even unpacked yet.' She threw her thumb back at the house she hadn't even looked at properly.

'We're doing it so we can run regular swimming classes for our little ones.' Karen pointed to the giggly child patting both the big black buffalo and mangy mutt.

Nice hustle, Karen. 'I can't bake. So, um ...' Que shrugged.

'What do you do?'

'I'm a digital doodler.'

'Huh?'

'I'm a graphic designer.'

'YES!' Kat waved her arms in a hallelujah. 'Finally, my prayers have been answered. What's your specialty?'

'I design websites, logos, and merch.' Merchandise was her side hustle. 'I could donate time to do a digital design for a business. But you can't put that in a stall like you'd sell cakes.' Cake stalls and school events was a whole new world for Que.

'That's brilliant,' said Kat. 'We could raffle it off. I'll buy ten tickets.'

'Nah.' Karen swatted the air as if at a pesky fly. 'The pub does the chook raffle every Friday. We need to think bigger, because I reckon we can score other services to raise money, like Que's thing. I'm gonna hit up that snooty mine manager. Kat, you can hit up your husband about doing a car service in his mechanic's shop.'

'Kyle will be into that. We could have my brother-in-law,

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Jimmy, offer to play barbie king for someone's next party. JT could do a car detailing or small engine repairs like a lawnmower service. I could do a home handyman's job or an interior design consult—'

'How about a silent auction then?' butted in Que, amazed how overcrowded the house had gotten.

'A what?' Bertha asked, still catching her breath.

'People can place their bids inside a sealed box displaying the service they want to use, and the highest bid wins.' If Que was planning to stick around it'd be a great way to advertise among the locals. But then again, how much digital work did they need in this tiny outback town?

'That's brilliant,' said Kat. 'I'm going to buy you the best coffee you'll ever find in this town—once you've settled in, of course—and we can brainstorm ideas.'

'You can do the flyers,' said Karen.

'I haven't even unpacked yet.'

Then Bertha slapped a frail hand over her heart while clutching onto Que's arm. Her eyes widened as she panted for breath. Sweat broke out across her forehead, and she dropped five shades of pale in the blink of an eye.

'Bertha?'

'Can't ... breathe ...' She clutched her heart, collapsing to

the ground. Kat and Que barely caught her from smacking her head against the concrete.

Karen squealed, flapping her hands in a panic. 'Is Bertha having a heart attack?'

Que knelt beside Bertha and felt for a pulse, but she couldn't find one. 'Call an ambulance.' Que started compressions. 'Come on ...' This was not gonna happen in her new house. No way in hell.

'That could be hours, it's run by volunteers—'

'Bertha!' Richard rushed up the steps.

'We need to get to the hospital. NOW.' Que pinched Bertha's nose and forced air into her new neighbours' lungs.

'We'll go in my car.' Richard trembled, fumbling with the keys, they fell to the floor.

'I'll get the car. Karen, grab Billie.' Kat snatched up the keys and tore through the house, as Karen raced for Billie, who stood shoulder to shoulder with the buffalo and stray dog.

In a matter of moments, they had Bertha laid down in the back of the Landcruiser. Que continued compressions, while Kat drove. Richard held Bertha's hand and Karen hugged Billie.

Que's arms ached and sweat ran down her back, as she fought to keep her neighbour alive. She wasn't a hero. She never got involved in anything, always choosing to walk away—run,

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more like it—but here she was, trying to save a stranger.

If this lady died, it was a bad omen in a place she hoped to call home.

Dust plumed high behind them on the track, hiding the following buffalo, leaving behind the tiny house under that big sky, with a stray dog guarding its open front door.

Welcome to the neighbourhood.

2

The blacktop glistened like a rope of liquorice stretching under the sun, where the lumpy landscape bled into the dusky pink horizon, with its familiar trees soon swallowed into hills to become microscopic fleas on the landscape.

With the wind in his face, Connor chased down the white line with only the sound of his Harley, and he flew.

This was freedom.

No cars. No people. No uniforms. No enemies.

He gunned the throttle on the bike's handlebars and the throaty pistons powered to claw closer to the tarmac, as if he'd become one with the road. It glided over the curves, the lazy dips, and smooth wide corners as if following the contours of a woman's body. This open road was a pure power shot for an adrenaline junkie.

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He glanced at his side mirror, where he'd seen nothing for hours as he chased the sun. Only to arch his eyebrow at the police car.

Where did you come from?

The speedometer on his bike was hightailing it at one-eighty clicks. Gripping the throttle, he was tempted to gun for the two hundred on that open road.

Again, his eyes flickered to his mirrors for that cop car. Did he dare ...

Hang on, this was cattle country, filled with cocky cowboys. So that slick highway pursuit car was probably tricked-up for speed and no doubt ready to rumble. *Dammit.*

With a hearty exhale, he eased the bike to a respectable speed, slow enough to get off and walk.

Now, would they flash the lights and pull him over? Or move along like a good little piggie?

The cop's car lights flashed blue.

Arsehole.

Connor pulled his bike to the side of the gravelly highway and turned it off, as he tried to calculate the demerit points left on his licence.

What's the big deal, anyway? They were in the middle of freaking nowhere, the only person he'd hurt would be himself.

The silence was deafening with the bike's vibration still rattling in his chest. Climbing off the bike, he pulled down the black neck gator covering his face, imprinted with the skull. He slipped off his helmet, then scratched at his buzz cut while sizing up the dude in the uniform.

The cop was a beefy bloke. His policeman's uniform outlined muscles that'd make him an even scrapper in strength, *if they were to get hot headed, if the guy knew how to punch.*

But Connor had to remember he wasn't in enemy territory now, just back in the Northern Territory.

'Can I help you, officer?' Then he noticed the stripes on the cop's shoulders. 'Sorry, Sergeant.'

That earned him a nod from the cop's uniform-issued cap, pulled down low on his brow, his eyes hidden behind dark glasses. 'Got your licence on you there, mate?'

'Yeah, sure ... Here.'

'Nice bike.'

'It sure is.' He glanced back at his pride and joy. Connor only had three pleasures in his life: his bike, his gun, and his bourbon. Simple.

'No freaking way. Connor Symes?' said the officer, reading Connor's licence. 'Elsie Creek's bad boy is back in town. Do I have a reason to worry?'

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Connor gazed up at the sky, so much smaller on land without a sea to mirror it. After all these years, surely his reputation was buried deep beneath the dust. 'Nope. Just visiting.'

Then the cop chuckled, removing his hat and glasses. 'It's me, Marcus.'

Connor screwed up his face at his old school mate, now a man. But what made it worse he was a cop—which was impossible! 'Marcus? You're a policeman?'

'Yeah, who'd have thought.'

'The last I saw of you was when you were being chased out of town in that stolen car.' In a hail of flashing blue lights and screaming sirens, Marcus had literally booted Connor out of the car's front passenger seat to roll in the dirt. It's where he lay in the dark, helplessly watching his best mate speed down the highway with every cop car in town chasing him. Now he was a cop.

'The last I'd heard you were shipped off to sea.'

'Navy. But you ... Don't they know what you did?'

Marcus shrugged beefy shoulders in a shirt that was stretched to capacity, but that wry grin was from the boy Connor remembered.

'Are you stationed at Elsie Creek, or just passing through?' Connor pointed to the patrol car. 'Nice wheels, man.'

'She flies, like you were.'

It was Connor's turn to shrug.

'Are you in town for your mum?'

'Yeah, I missed her in Adelaide.'

'I saw her at the hospital, yesterday. For someone whose been through a double bypass, she looks great. I think they're releasing her today.'

'Good.' He'd head straight for the house.

'How long are you in town for?'

'Until Mum and Dad are back on their feet.' Nothing and nowhere was permanent for Connor, not since the night he'd left this town.

'Well here, mate, consider this warning to *slow down near town* as a welcome home present.' Marcus handed back the licence to Connor.

'When did the speed limit change?'

'A few years back. The locals voted to change it for this pesky pet water buffalo who likes to wear ribbons.'

'Er, thanks.' Connor arched his eyebrow, putting his licence away. 'Hey, I'll buy you a beer and we'll catch up.'

'That'd be good. But ...' Marcus leaned in with his eyes glistening, wearing the same mischievous look Connor remembered. 'What we did as kids, goes nowhere, right?'

Connor grinned, holding his hands up to the officer as if

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surrendering. 'Secrets have always been safe with me. I've never ratted out a mate, and I never will. Damn, I can't believe they made you a cop.'

'And you got accepted into the Navy. You barely passed school.'

'All those years cutting class to go pig-hunting with you didn't help.'

'What do you do in the job?' Marcus asked. 'Your dad didn't really know much.'

'Sergeant, Special Operations Command.'

'Jeez.' Marcus's nod was a sign of respect. 'You packing any of those toys they give soldiers to play with?'

The cheeky arse! 'Nope. I'm on holidays.' A working holiday if it meant hanging on the farm again.

'Enjoy your holidays then. Hey, once you've settled in, come round home and we'll have that drink. Say g'day to your parents for me.' Marcus tapped his cap's brim in a salute before opening the driver's door.

'I'll shout the bourbon while you tell me how you cheated on your Sergeant's exam.'

'Probably the same way you did. But I won't say no to a bourbon with a beer chaser.' In the sleek patrol car, Marcus spun it around to head back in the direction he'd come from.

Where did Marcus hide that cop car out here to catch speedsters?

Marcus. The boy who used to live and breathe trouble with a capital T was a cop. And Connor had been the proper partner in crime to Marcus, where they both burnt through the rule books in a town that hated them for it.

If Marcus was an officer of the law, maybe they'd forgiven Connor too?

Kicking over the Harley's engine, he slid on his helmet and scowled. In the distance, the town's roofs glistened like a tiny solar panel lost in the outback.

Fighting the temptation to swing around and ride the other way, he twisted the throttle and the bike rolled along the blacktop, where he followed that white line into town. A town he used to call home. He could just hear the old buzzards preaching, *get out your pitchforks, people, coz Connor Symes is back in town.*

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When it comes to first and second impressions, they couldn't get any worse. But when a heated moment ends with a kiss — it breaks all the rules.

As Elsie Creek's newest resident, Que is way too jaded to go near any man, let alone Connor, the judgemental jerk next door. Busy trying to fit in, she now has to pretend that kissing the beautiful bad boy meant nothing!

Yet the chemistry Connor shares with the feisty single mother is undeniable. So to avoid the temptation of diving too deep, he'll obey her house rules of no afterschool visits, no talk of the past, and forget a forever future. Perfect for this military man dancing with his own demons, eager to return to base and avoid the small-town gossipers.

That is until trouble crosses boundaries in their very own neighbourhood, threatening everything they love — who will be left standing?

Set in the uniquely rugged and romantic outback, the bestselling Elsie Creek Series is the perfect home for healing hearts and new beginnings.

*Are you ready to Escape to a **HAPPILY EVER AFTER?***

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