


BEING SISTERS DOESN'T MEAN THEY'RE FRIENDS

THE  
*Sister*  
TRIP



AUSTRALIAN BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEL A ROWE



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they're friends

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

For those sisters who are friends  
& for those friends  
who are like sisters.

Mel A Rowe

# One

**I**'m your sister!

'That doesn't mean I have to like you,' Teà said to Little Miss Lottie Voss, the younger sister who ruled this tiny, somewhat claustrophobic empire, from the front seat of dear old Dad's 1970 XY Ford Falcon 500, with a big view of nothing. She couldn't believe the car still existed—and right now, she hated it.

What kind of father demands that his two daughters take an ancient, yet immaculately shiny, dark blue beast through the outback without any air conditioning? It didn't even have a decent stereo. And they were well out of phone range, heading north with Alice Springs hours behind them.

Teà tried to get comfortable on the bench seat, but the stupid bulky jar her sister insisted on keeping between them was annoying. 'I'm sick of this thing taking up all the room in the front seat.' She unclipped her seatbelt and hoisted the jar to the back seat, where the rest of Lottie's junk lived. Which was a lot of luggage, all in plaid. They matched Lottie's dress.

'You can't put it there.' Lottie reached back, keeping

one hand on the steering wheel.

‘Well, I can, and I did.’

‘Oh no, you can’t. It should be here. I’m driving and it’s my rules.’

‘Get a grip, princess, and keep two hands on the steering wheel at all times.’ Turning around again, Teà pushed the ceramic jar further onto the middle of the back seat. ‘It can sit there.’

‘It’s unsecure.’

‘It’s—*watch out*, Lottie!’

Lottie slammed her little feet on the brake.

Teà was flung against the dashboard. The tyres squealed as the car’s chunky square body swerved on the deserted road.

The engine stalled.

Smoke filled the air.

A tick-tick-tick came from the beefy six-cylinder engine.

‘Did I hit it?’ Lottie asked in a soft voice, leaning over the steering wheel. A sweat bead trickled down her temple.

‘Oh, I can’t look. I just can’t.’

‘So now you want me to play the big sister?’ Teà wiggled free from her wedged position between the car seat and dashboard, with her bum almost touching the floor.

She hoisted open the heavy passenger door to roll onto the tarred road. Hot stones embedded in her hands and she jumped to her feet.

The heat was horrendous, hitting her with laser



precision from a sun that hung like a lonely globe in a sky completely clear of clouds. They'd left the land of rain and lush green hills for this sunburnt world of red dust. Welcome to the Northern Territory outback.

She rubbed her tender spine. 'Does my back have a welt?'

It could've been worse, considering how slow Lottie was driving. Snails would win this epic road race.

'You shouldn't have taken off your seatbelt. This is all your fault. Go check the front of the car. We're on a deadline.' Lottie tapped her wristwatch.

Teà's boots were the only sound on the road washed with a glistening heat wave that disappeared like a mirage on the curve of the horizon.

She didn't want to peek at the front of the Ford either. But they were in the middle of the road surrounded by nothing but red dirt ranges and lots of scrub. Purple pockets of wildflowers splashed like paint spilled on a red carpet, but the green on the spindly trees was an icky army-olive green.

'What is it?' Lottie called out from her safe space behind the wheel, straightening up her blonde ponytail. She grimaced at the sun, then sat back in her seat and slathered on more sunscreen, which would sweat off into milky streaks in a matter of moments.

Teà swiped at a fly.

The flies were a pain.

Small. Black. Sticky flies.

Teà took a deep breath and forced herself to inch forward. *Please be nothing. Please be nothing.* She wasn't in the mood to drag away any roadkill. Nor was she a fan of this road trip, constantly bickering with Lottie. If Lottie wasn't her sister, Teà would've left this party back in South Australia days ago.

The good thing is they only had four days left, then they'd never have to see each other again. She just had to remember, there was a big pot of gold at the end of this dusty rainbow.

There was a flapping noise at the front of the car, accompanied by a squealing mewl that sounded like a baby lion cub.

Teà cringed as her stomach squeezed tight. *No, it wasn't still alive. Was it?*

She peeked over the car's long bonnet, sparkling under the relentless outback sun, and spotted feathers. Not the scattering you'd expect from hitting a bird, as they were still attached. Stuck in the car's grill.

'It's a duck.' A white-bodied duck, with pink webbed feet, and a chestnut band. Its wings a vibrant dark green, so rich they seemed black.

'Grab my gloves from my daypack, Lottie.' Teà squatted beside the duck. 'Hello, little fella, I'm sorry my sister's driving sucks.'

'I heard that.' Lottie came up beside her and held out the gloves. 'Why do you have such thick gloves in your bag?'

'For work.' As Teà slid on the gloves she felt the ground rumbling beneath her boots. She peeked around the car's boxy body, the outback scrub reflecting off the car's deep navy-blue paint. 'Lottie, there's a truck coming.' The car stood barely off the road, with a long, swerving line of black rubber laid out in a crazy-crayon trail.

'Oh, I'll move the car.' Lottie headed for the open driver's door.

'No, you can't. You'll kill it.'

The large truck went down through the gears, then there was a hiss of its brakes.

'Lottie, wave him through.'

'I did, but it's obvious he wants to stop.'

'Or your waving skill is as bad as your driving, and he thinks we need help.' Teà turned away from the wave of red dust stirred up by the road train. The gravel crunched and popped under the massive tyres as the truck and its three trailers came to a halt.

'Are those helicopters on your trailers?' Lottie asked the driver, who was jumping out of the truck.

Teà double-blinked at the dream-like vision of a male swaggering towards them on the deserted outback highway.

'Yeah, muster choppers. Three of them.' Heel toe, heel toe, his boot stride was sure and steady. His well-worn denim jeans hugged a set of sturdy thighs that made his lazy hip-rolling stride perfect in those jeans. His wide-brimmed cowboy hat sat low on his brow, shading sunglasses that hid

his eyes, but showed his deep outdoorsy tan. 'You girls all right?'

*Girls!* Teà rolled her eyes, dragging her gaze away from the fantasy cowboy to return her focus on the duck. Had she been drinking enough water? Her imagination seemed to be running away with her.

'We hit a duck. And it's stuck.'

'*You* hit the duck, Lottie. I'm trying to save it.' Teà ever so gently wrapped her hands around the duck's tender body, positioning herself.

'Here, let me help.' He didn't even wait for a response, removing his sunglasses, perching them on the brim of his Akubra. 'I'll hold the body; you get its wings. Try to keep its feathers straight so it can fly away.'

'Sure.' The sweat trickled down her temples, and her shirt stuck to her skin, as she carefully pulled back the trapped feathers, one by one. Some were severely twisted, making her heart fall for the poor little thing that seemed astonishingly calm. 'I'm Teà, that's Lottie.'

'Devin.' His brown eyes were a rich coffee caramel, with his eyebrows a deeper brown, the same colour of his hair barely seen beneath the hat's brim. Damn, he was handsome. Too handsome.

Teà licked her lips, suddenly parched, yet also salivating, as her blood pressure headed into boiling billycan territory. *It's just the weather*, she told herself—which was hotter than a thousand ovens someone forgot to switch off. 'What type of duck is this?'

‘Burdekin duck. A juvenile. There are some grey patches on the side. They’re a protected species in this area.’

‘What does that mean?’ Lottie’s shadow spread over them, offering some relief from the relentless sun.

‘You get a year’s jail and a massive fine for hurting one of these fellas.’

‘Lottie did it.’ Teà grinned, using the back of her gloves to wipe at the sweat.

Devin’s lips barely curled in the corners, as the sun-kissed creases deepened around those brown eyes. They were more than just a plain brown.

‘But-but—’ Lottie, already pale, dropped to a shade of glow-in-the-dark kind of pale.

Teà carefully removed the last of the wing’s tip, successfully pulling it free from the Ford’s grill. ‘Do ducks live in the middle of nowhere?’

Devin shrugged. ‘Stretch out its wing to see if it’s broken.’

As Teà gingerly straightened the wing, it bellowed a mewling, screeching honk that echoed into the wilderness. She cupped her mouth, waiting for the last of those horrific cries to cease.

‘Did I break it? Oh no, I’m going to jail, aren’t I?’ Lottie, the drama queen, pressed her hand to her forehead and turned to face the sun. ‘Destined for a life behind bars, I’ll miss Mother’s Day, Sophie’s first day at big school, and Pip’s first day of kindergarten. And my husband will divorce me and marry some hussy from the schoolyard.’

Devin arched an eyebrow.

‘I think it’s sprained?’ He carried it to the side of the road, putting the duck gently on the ground. Its white body and pink webbed feet were a stark contrast to the red soil. The chestnut stripe hung like a necklace around its feathery chest, reminding her of a mayor’s golden livery chain worn as part of their ceremonial robes. It was a pretty duck. Until it fell over to its side, like a dead duck.

‘Did it have a heart attack?’ Lottie asked.

‘Probably gone into shock.’ Devin adjusted his hat. ‘You can leave it here.’

‘What are its chances of survival?’ Teà asked.

His gaze was steady, with his thick lashes highlighting eyes that weren’t just brown. They were a dark caramel blended perfectly with rich roasted coffee beans. It came with a stare that punched a burst of pure caffeine through her veins, making her pulse jack hammer. She lifted her hair off the back of her neck, desperate for a breeze.

Again, Devin shrugged a set of square shoulders that made his T-shirt stretch over a very fine muscular torso. He gazed up at the sky where a lone kite was circling above, then returned his unflinching gaze to her. ‘Not good.’

‘Is duck good to eat? In case we need to hide the evidence.’ Teà winked at Devin. Caramel and coffee were fast becoming her favourite food groups.

His lip barely curled for a fleeting second. But it was there. ‘Never had Burdekin before. But I’ve tried Peking duck.’

'I don't mind Szechuan duck.'

'Got a ringer back home who does a decent smoked goose. He could do a duck.'

'I tried duck à l'orange once.'

'Isn't pate made from duck?' Devin kept a straight face, but his eyes were shining.

'So it is.' Teà pushed her tongue to her cheek, struggling to keep up the game. She was used to bantering like one of the boys. Flirting for her was foreign. She didn't flirt. Ever.

But then the duck wheezed. Struggling to sit up, it staggered like it was drunk.

'Look who's coming around.' She'd never been happier for a duck. It was cute.

Devin squatted down beside her as the duck limped towards him.

'You should take the duck.'

'I'm in a truck. You take the duck. Take a few photos and make yourselves famous on Instagram or something.'

'Can we do that? If it's a protected duck.' Teà's smile softened as the duck limped towards her, using her arm to prop itself up and to coo like a pigeon. 'Is that a wheeze?'

'They whistle, wheeze. Rarely quack. Strange ducks.'

'How do you know about them?'

'We've got a couple of billabongs full of 'em back home.'

Lottie stood by the car, wringing her hands. 'If you have places full of them, why are they so protected?'

Devin shrugged. ‘They mate for life. I think they got hunted to near extinction.’

As the rugged cowboy tenderly patted the injured duck, it brought up some extinct emotions Teà hadn’t felt in ages. She didn’t want to either. That tender warmth brewing on the inside to fill her with a serene calmness—was not real.

‘Hello! Peoples,’ screeched Lottie.

‘Shh, Lottie, you’re upsetting the duck.’ It shifted closer to Teà for protection. *Aww.*

‘Don’t you mean your lunch, the way you two carnivores are carrying on?’

‘Steady on.’ Devin stood to full height. A tower of raw masculinity, so much taller than the dainty Lottie.

‘Why don’t you take the duck back to your billabong, Devin?’ Teà said.

‘Can’t. I’m on a job.’ He inspected the car’s front grill. ‘Nice car. Luckily, there’s no damage. Where are you two headed?’

‘The next town, I believe?’

‘Wauchope?’

Lottie pulled out her carefully regimented itinerary, a map covered in highlights and sticky notes. ‘Aren’t the Devil’s Marbles next?’

‘Two hours that way. And being this late in the day,’ he said, again gazing up at the sky, ‘you’ll be camping at Rusty’s Roadhouse, too.’

‘You guessed right. Is there someone we can give the



duck to at the roadhouse? Like some wildlife rescue?’

‘Teà ...’ He turned and faced her, poking up his hat’s brim. But the way he said her name in that voice, with a stare that went beyond a look, it felt so intimate. ‘That’s a protected duck. No one is going to touch it for fear of getting pinged. You and Lillie—’

‘My name is Lottie. It’s short for Loretta.’

‘Hmph.’ He didn’t even gaze at Lottie, just kept those eyes on Teà. The unwavering attention was unnerving.

The duck tapped on Teà’s leg, gratefully allowing her to drag her eyes away from Devin. The poor thing was so helpless.

With no thought she picked it up, tenderly tucking it under her arm, where it cooed. How was this duck so tame? ‘He deserves a second chance at life. I can’t abandon him out here. He’d get lonely, and nobody deserves to be left alone and defenceless against the elements ...’ She’d know.

There were now three kites circling above them. *The vultures*. ‘What if we dropped it off at some billabong, somewhere?’

‘Oh, good idea.’ Lottie nodded so fast it should have brought on a case of whiplash as she spun to face Devin. ‘Where is the nearest billabong?’

‘It’s the dry season,’ Devin said to Teà, tenderly stroking the duck’s neck. ‘There’s no water around for miles. So how that duck got out here ...’ He let the words hang, his fingers barely brushing her arm.

She swallowed, stepping back from the dishy cowboy

in denim. She tried not to watch him—honest to God, she did—but he was the only place her eyes wanted to travel. Slowly. From hat brim to boot heels.

His eyes remained on her, in a quiet look. A look that lasted for so long it unnerved her, forcing her to look away.

‘We’ll find a waterhole or something. Or until the duck flies away. Come on, Lottie, we’re on a deadline.’ Her face was flushed as her T-shirt clung to her sticky skin. ‘Um, thanks for your help, Devin,’ she stammered out. ‘Maybe Lottie will release the moths from her purse to buy you a beer for saving the duck and her neck.’

Devin’s chuckle was low as he turned to walk away.

Hot damn, he was throwing off some sexy vibes.

‘Hey, what do ducks eat?’ She opened the back door, but couldn’t help pausing to watch his sexy hip-rolling swagger and that beautiful behind that was hugged perfectly in those well-worn jeans. She was so tempted to tap his butt just to see how soft that denim was and how tight those buns were.

*Not. Gonna. Happen.*

He shrugged at her, sliding on his sunglasses, as he kicked at the front tyre of his truck. ‘Google it when you get into phone range.’

‘When will that be?’

‘Not for another two hours, *thataway*.’ He tossed his thumb over his shoulder as he walked along the side of the truck, checking the ropes strapping down the three helicopters. One for each trailer.

Good. She didn't need that in her face.

'Lottie, we could take the duck back to Alice Springs. I'm sure we could find a park ranger or a vet to help it.' Teà stroked the soft feathers of the duck settling in her arms. It was probably still in shock.

Lottie faced the direction they'd come from, then down at her map of many colours. 'Nope.' She rolled it up with a snap. 'I have to do this. You could hitchhike back to Alice, but then we'd both be breaking the rules, and we'd both lose. I have my family to think of, which is far more important than you and that dumb duck.'

They were both committed to this road trip from hell, whether they liked it or not. There was too much to lose.

Teà looked down at the duck. 'Ready to join our road trip, Quacker?'

'You named it! You can't eat it now.' Again, Devin's chuckle carried from the trailers, making her grin like a schoolgirl. She was everything uncool around this guy.

'Let's go, Lottie. You drive.' Teà clambered into the back seat. The car was an oven.

'I'm not having that feathery thing in Dad's car—'

'It's that or jail? Remember, we're on a deadline, Lottie.' Teà dumped the urn back onto the front seat. 'And you can share the front seat with Dad.'

## Two

Steering the car, Lottie glared at the rear-view mirror reflecting her sister, lounging across the back seat with her stylish lace-up leather boots resting on the front seat. With a dumb duck. 'Have some respect.' She thumped at the seat to force those boots off.

'To you or the car?'

'I don't even let my husband put his socked feet on our coffee tables.'

'Why not?'

'Excuse me?'

'Isn't home a place where you chill? Or does he trek a trailer-load of mud through the house, while ponging of sheep dung. To plonk his butt on the couch, slapping down a sweat-stained hat on the floor, as he cracks open a beer?'

'Adrian would never do that.'

'Oh, wait. I was talking about Dad.'

'Dad never did that.'

Teà arched an eyebrow at her.

'In the end, he didn't.' Lottie glanced at the urn seated beside her. 'Dad was good.'

‘Sure, he was. To you. Always to his *little mate, Lottie.*’

Lottie sat straighter with chin raised. ‘Because I was the dutiful daughter. I was there for him. Not like you, who ran away.’

‘Well, Daddy dearest must have loved me enough to include me in this stupid road trip of horrors we’re on.’ Teà shoved a suitcase off the back seat. ‘You really have a thing for plaid. Not only are you wearing it, but your luggage is all plaid.’

Lottie frowned, her knuckles whitening as she gripped the steering wheel. It still irked her that after seventeen years Teà got to swan in and act like the queen of the car, hogging the back seat, shoving Lottie’s precious plaid luggage around.

Lottie never travelled, so it was the first time she’d used her luggage. Unlike her husband, Adrian, flying in and out for the mines. Leaving her to manage the farm, house, two small children, a hundred sheep, crops, leases, and a cranky father—all while maintaining the dressmaking business her mother had started.

She didn’t have time to be stuck in a vintage car playing another one of her father’s map games. And she certainly didn’t have time to play nice with her older sister, Teà.

Teà. The taller sister. The fun sister who didn’t have a care in the world. Who got to traipse freely around the world with a backpack full of excuses for not coming home sooner. She hadn’t come back for Lottie’s wedding, didn’t send flowers for Lottie’s mother’s funeral, and hadn’t

fronted for their own father's funeral.

The only way Teà Eliza Voss had finally deigned to grace them with her presence was for Lottie to file a missing person's report with the police. She hadn't wanted to—she'd *had to*, or the whole inheritance deal was toast!

It was part of the rules.

The only problem was, Teà popped up looking like the sister she remembered. With her dark hair, so much longer now, in sleek black pants and long black coat. Complaining of jet lag and carrying a suitcase that magically turned into a backpack.

How dare that over-dressed backpacking female turn her nose up at Lottie for packing four cases and a beauty bag. No way was Lottie leaving home without her hairdryer!

'We're going to the outback, you won't need many clothes,' so said toffee-nosed Teà, dumping her black bag into the boot.

Black. Everything was black. Black socks, black underwear—the superfine kind of black lace underwear that made Adrian pause over his morning cuppa while staring out the window like he did most mornings—when he was home. Only to see Teà's fancy underwear swinging on the clothesline like some stripper doing a horizontal pole dance.

Those five days, waiting to leave to start this road trip, were torture—especially with her sister hanging around the house.

*Ugh.* It sucked more than to misalign the princess seams on a bride's bodice.

Especially when the kids loved their Aunt Teà. Not to mention how Adrian got all gawky around Teà. Then the lawyer had to speak with Teà in private, to re-explain the rules of this road trip. How come Teà got all the attention?

Victor Voss was Lottie's dad, too. She was a grieving daughter who deserved the attention. After all, it was Lottie who doted over her father. Who washed, ironed, fed, and fetched for her father, nearly her entire adult life.

All while they never heard from Teà again.

Gone. Just like that. Without any explanation.

It was soon followed by Teà's room getting cleaned out, all photos taken down, successfully removing all traces of Teà's existence from their household.

Yet, her parents never gave Lottie an explanation. Nothing. It was as if her older sister had died, and no one dared mention Teà's name again.

Until Daddy put Teà in the will.

So of course, the money-hungry Teà showed up.

Who wouldn't, when over four hundred acres of prime farmland was on the line?

It's what was driving them to follow a breadcrumb trail of hand-written notes across the country. They were like love letters, without the love, from their father! Leaving them with no clue as to where they were going.

The lawyer had merely handed over an envelope, along with a cheque to cover their travel expenses. The first

set of instructions found inside that sealed business-sized envelope, contained a note and map drawn by their father. It came with a list of items to stock up at Port Augusta. Then on to Coober Pedy, to then aim for the Devil's Marbles.

But there was a whole lot of nothing in the Northern Territory—home to the harshest, remotest regions of the Australian outback. It scared her being this far from home.

Did Sophie lock up the chickens when she collected the eggs? Did Adrian help their daughter mark the dates on them? Sophie wasn't good with numbers. Did her dear baby boy, Pip, have enough warm clothes on? Did her husband remember to warm up their hot water bottles for Pip's bed? She didn't trust their son with an electric blanket yet. Were they eating right? Were they—

'Quack.'

Teà giggled, hand feeding that stupid duck in the back seat like the cold queen of broken hearts being carted around in her vintage carriage.

The duck Lottie could do a year in jail for.

'Dad would kill us having a duck in his car.' Lottie glowered at the dumb, damaged duck. 'No pets were allowed in this car.'

'Dad used to let Spot lie in this car all the time.'

'Who?'

'Spot. The ginger cat who had an oil-stain spot on its back. He'd lie across the front dashboard in winter for the sun.'

'I don't remember Spot.'



‘You were young when he died.’ Teà lifted a plaid ribbon as if measuring it up for size. ‘Dad said Spot was the best mouse catcher he ever had. No mouse messed with the electrics of this car with Spot on the job.’

‘Is that my ribbon?’ Lottie frowned, peeking over her shoulder for just a second. If she dared to take her eyes off the road for too long, she might hit something again.

‘You are the only one here who wears plaid.’

‘What are you doing?’

‘Bandaging up *your* duck.’ Teà wrapped the plaid ribbon around one of its legs, like a splint, allowing the duck to stand steadier.

‘It’s not my duck.’

‘It is now. It’s wearing plaid. He’s very stylish.’ Teà giggled. ‘Considering how old this car is, it’s in great condition. Where’s it been, same car shed?’

‘No, we moved it to the back shed. Only brought it out for weddings.’

‘Weddings?’

Lottie smiled, rolling her shoulders, her grip loosening a little on the steering wheel. ‘I used to drive this in weddings.’

‘So, you and your mum not only made the wedding gowns, but you also drove the bride’s car, too?’

‘I loved it. We had to be there anyway, to ensure their bridal gowns and bridesmaids’ dresses were perfect for the ceremony. It was Adrian’s idea about using this Ford for weddings. He even drove it a few times, too. That’s how we

met—at a wedding, when I was busily repairing a small tear the bride had made with her heels.’

‘Was it love at first sight?’

‘Oh, yes.’ Her heart just bloomed, as her hand grip loosened on the steering wheel. ‘I was like Cinderella with pearl-headed silk pins hanging from my mouth and tucked up along my sleeve. On my knees, mending a bride’s gown, and in walked Prince Charming himself.’ She sighed, her shoulders relaxing.

Tea sat forward, hooking her arms over the back of the seat. Her delicate perfume was so fresh, considering they direly needed a shower from sitting in a hot car. ‘Really? Prince Charming?’

‘Adrian’s my kind of prince. Pushing up his clunky glasses, stuttering as he spoke, with his tie all skew-whiff, and shirt all wrong. I had to help him.’

‘And you, being a fixer, found your fixer upper.’

For the first time since they’d met again, they shared a smile. A half smile.

But Lottie couldn’t afford to make friends with the enemy, so she returned her attention to the long road ahead that brought promises of a big golden egg. ‘Adrian was the bride’s younger brother. He had to drive his sister to the ceremony, and they were already late. They were worried the groom was going to do a runner.’

‘Why?’

‘She was pregnant.’

‘Did the bride tell you that?’

‘She didn’t have to. I had to keep letting out the darts in her bridal gown. And most brides plan their wedding a year in advance, but not this one. It was quite the scandal. Adrian said his father demanded they get married, and Adrian was supposed to be the muscle.’

‘Your husband, Adrian?’

Teà’s giggle made Lottie’s back straighten.

Oh, bless him, Adrian wasn’t perfect, but he was her husband. Hers.

But truth be known, Adrian was terrified of that brother-in-law. ‘It doesn’t matter now. They got divorced and Adrian’s sister remarried this nice sheep farmer in Tumby Bay. But that first wedding where I met Adrian had the town talking of the early baby.’

‘Weren’t you a shotgun bride yourself?’

‘Excuse me!’ Lottie’s eyelids fluttered, as if washing away some imaginary grit. Momentarily distracting her from the never-ending tarmac road, with its white line and occasional sign. There was nothing else out here to keep her entertained.

Teà counted on her outstretched fingers to hold up six digits on two hands. ‘Sophie, your eldest daughter, is six and you’ve been married for six years.’

Lottie lifted her chin so high her neck was tight. ‘I got pregnant on our honeymoon, thank you very muchly! It’s what married people do.’ A honeymoon that was an overnight stay at the nearest seaside town, following a disastrous ceremony. They never got their honeymoon to

some fancy vacation spot, what with shearing to be done, crops to be harvested, and her mother passing, it threw out all her plans of a perfect wedding.

She scowled at the mirror, reflecting the cretin in the back seat. This was all Teà's fault. They wouldn't need to do this road trip if Teà hadn't shown up. 'Thanks for coming to my wedding, by the way.'

'Did you invite me?'

'I didn't know where to send the invite.'

Teà sat back, stroking the duck sleeping beside her on a plaid towel.

'Is that my towel?' Lottie asked.

'You had four of them.'

'You could have used a newspaper, or *your* towel?'

'I only have the one and it's in the boot. You really have a thing for plaid.' Teà gave an evil laugh that made Lottie's neck tingle.

'I like plaid.'

'I'm not judging.'

'Oh, yes, you are. I can hear it in your tone.'

'Tone? Ha. Have you heard yourself speak to human beings lately?'

'At least I speak to people, not like you.' Teà never got involved, not in conversations, except with Lottie's children, while Lottie was busily getting ready to do this trek. Teà did nothing to help them on this journey. No way in hell was Lottie going to hand over the car keys to a stranger.

‘Did Dad drive this car at weddings?’

‘No.’

‘Why not? It sounds like fun. Dad always called this the family car.’ Teà patted the interior with a wistful expression on her face. ‘Remember those Sundays? We’d get dragged out of bed, bundled into the back seat, to follow a map.’ Teà pointed at Lottie’s map spread over the front seat. ‘His lucky two-up coins, a compass, a tank of fuel and an esky full of food and drinks, and away we’d go at sunrise.’

Lottie’s lips inadvertently released a smile.

She remembered those days, sitting in the middle between her big sister and her dad, to give her mother a day off.

She side-glanced at the urn. Now it was her father’s turn to sit in the middle of the front seat of the car that had taken them on some extraordinary adventures.

The best times were when they’d go fishing by a stream, where she’d squeeze her toes in the soft grass, making daisy chains under dappled sunshine. Teà would share her fishing line and help teach Lottie to lace up her shoes, or plait her hair with wildflowers.

But that all stopped when Lottie was ten.

Even Teà’s bedroom, with its ceiling coated in posters of boy bands, was gone. Once there stood a thick luxurious off-white looped rug at the end of Teà’s bed, where plush purple cushions lived. It was the perfect spot to lie down while Teà read her stories, or where she could do her colouring while Teà did her homework. It’s where Teà

spoke to some friend on her hamburger phone, twisting her fingers on the long twisty cord. All of it gone, when Teà left. Like a big black hole with a trap door slamming it shut, locked tight with a thick industrial padlock.

‘The Sunday family drives stopped when you left. Dad rarely drove this car after that.’ She glared at her sister in the back seat as a hot ball of fire raged between her shoulder blades.

Her sister left them.

That thing didn’t deserve to sit inside this car.

And Teà certainly didn’t deserve to be included in her father’s will.

‘We’re here.’ Teà pointed to the bug-splattered windscreen...

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