

LOVE OR LEGACY - ONLY ONE CAN BE CHOSEN

The
STATION
OASIS OF THE **VOLUME TWO** OUTBACK

AUSTRALIAN BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEL A ROWE

The

STATION

OASIS OF THE OUTBACK DUOLOGY

Volume Two

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

When a journey of over a thousand
words brought you here—
let the adventure begin...

Mel A Rowe



The
STATION
— EST. 1885 —

One

Sunset reds mingled with twilight mauves that chased the sun as it dropped behind an endless horizon. In the centre of this vast outback countryside was Danbunnan Station's homestead. Jake Cullen stood in the growing shadows, inhaling the aromas from the muster room's kitchen, as the men's laughter carried across Danbunnan's compound. He was tempted to go into the muster room and invite his lady to share a midnight picnic under the stars. Sienna would love that. She loved any type of romantic gesture.

But he couldn't because no one could know about them. And it was getting harder to find time alone with her.

Instead of spending what precious time they had left together, Jake had to keep up the façade for the family.

He headed up the front steps to the grand stone house that stood on the small hill watching over the expansive station.

At the back door, Jake slipped off his boots before stepping inside the kitchen, where the twins were reading aloud from their new books. They'd collected them from the area school today, on the weekly visit to town. Jake hated town days because that's when Jess brought home the mail. And mail meant bills.

'Uncle Jake.' Kate, with bracelets jangling, hugged him around the waist as if she hadn't seen him in decades.

'Hey, Kate.' He hugged her back. It was nice to come home to this. Not that long ago it had been just Jake and an empty table, while his father sulked in the shadows of the lounge room.

Now the changes were evident. Young Aaron sat at the table set for dinner as his twin sister climbed onto her chair beside him. Gone were the boxes of jam jars and newspaper piles, revealing the faded wallpaper.

'You got a new kettle?' It was bright red and modern compared to the rest of the outdated kitchen.

Jess grinned from behind the counter, dishing up dinner. 'No more killing the curlew in the kitchen.'

Jake grinned. Sienna's habit of making an amusement out of simple daily items was catching. 'But red?' Jake asked, washing his hands in the sink.

'Red goes faster, Uncle Jake,' said Aaron, his napkin tucked

under his chin. 'That's why Sienna's rally car's red.'

'I see.' Jake's laughter rolled with ease. Sure, he had the mother of all problems hanging over him, but he'd learned from Sienna to enjoy the little things. He enjoyed every second spent with her, too, and she'd enjoy this. One day she might eat with them.

No, he couldn't think like that, because they couldn't have an *us*.

'Gotta sec, son?' Bob beckoned to Jake from the lounge room, holding up a letter.

They hadn't talked much since the Simmons's rodeo the other week. Jake was still ticked-off by his father's behaviour.

'Don't be long you two. Dinner's ready,' said Jess.

'What's up, Dad?' From the open window, the breeze wove through the cluttered lounge room. The lights were on, with Bob standing well away from the beaten-up leather reclining chair he'd practically lived in for over a year.

'Got a letter,' said Bob.

Not another bill. Jake hated town days.

'We've been nominated.'

'For what?'

'The local cattle station competition.'

'Bullshit!' Jake snatched the letter to read the formal notice. 'Those mongrel motherf—'

'*Jake!*' Jess closed the door shutting out the young twins, seated at the table with wide eyes and stunned grins.

‘Sorry, Jess.’ Jake then turned to his dad. ‘Simple: it’s a no.’ He spotted the address tag. ‘Here, you say no, it’s addressed to you, not me. End of discussion.’ He opened the door and took his seat at the table. ‘Man, I’m hungry. I hope there’s plenty for seconds.’

Bob followed, waving the letter. ‘Jake, we can’t say no.’

‘No.’ He said it again. ‘I will not get sucked into their bulldust.’ Jake attacked the lasagne, his mouth watering at the hearty richness and meaty flavours. He knew Sienna and Elliott handmade the pasta sheets as part of Elliott’s cooking course, and Sienna had used buffalo meat for the sauce. Sienna was reaching new heights with her meals, using all sorts of food found on this property. He’d never eaten so well. ‘This is good for buff mince.’

‘I know. Sienna says not to tell Elliott, or he’ll get an even bigger head,’ said Jess with a giggle.

Bob took a mouthful, raising his grey eyebrows. ‘This is all right. Not as good as the mushroom meat one Sienna made with yoghurt. That’s my favourite.’ Bob wiped his mouth with the napkin, then sipped from his water glass. ‘Jake, you can’t say no.’

Jake shovelled in more food to not respond. But chew.

‘What’s going on?’ Jess asked.

‘We’ve been nominated for the Northern Cattle Stations Competition,’ replied Bob.

‘Oh, no.’ Jess’s cutlery clanged onto her plate and her hands dropped into her lap, her fingers fidgeting. ‘I’m so sorry, Jake.’

‘Not gonna happen. I’m not having those sons of ...’ Again, Jake hesitated for the sake of his young niece and nephew. ‘They’re not coming here.’

Bob’s frown deepened. ‘They have to.’

‘They’re only coming here to stickybeak. And it’s all your fault, Dad.’ Jake glared at Bob at the opposite end of the table with his sister and the twins stuck in the middle.

‘My fault? How?’

‘If you hadn’t bragged to your mob of mates at the Simmons’s rodeo, they wouldn’t have nominated us.’

‘What has gotten into you?’

‘They’re only doing this to see what we have, like buyers visiting an open house inspection prior to an auction. They’re not interested in what we’re doing, and you aren’t either.’

‘I am so. This is my place too, you know,’ grumbled Bob.

‘You haven’t even stepped outside the compound and seen what I’ve done.’ Jake pushed his plate back and wiped his mouth on the napkin. ‘You know what? We should ask the men.’

Bob darkly scowled through knitted brows. ‘This does not involve them.’

‘This is their death warrant too. Forcing us to put on a show for those buzzards—*which we can’t afford.*’ Jake’s words bounced off the walls forcing everyone back in their seats.

After a moment, Bob muttered, ‘We can’t say no.’

'I'm not having the crew work harder for this show-pony bulldust when we get nothing out of it.' Jake resumed eating, conversation over.

Bob sniffed sharply, with his nose in the air. 'We'll be offending them if we don't do it.'

'Don't care.'

Bob's chin jutted higher as he rolled his shoulders back. 'Well, I already told them yes.'

'*What the hell!*' Jake dropped his cutlery and glared at his father. 'You. Had. No. Right.'

Bob sniffed deeper, resting fists on either side of his plate, as if digging into his place at the head of the table. 'I had every right; my name was on the letter.'

'Yeah, but your name's not on any of the bills, is it?' Jake eyeballed his father, furious.

'What do you want to do, Jake?' Jess asked timidly.

Jake wanted to talk to Sienna. But she was serving dinner for everyone on the station. Did he talk to Tom? His dad wouldn't want Jake talking to staff about family business, because it was against the rules. But they weren't just staff. If anything, Sienna had shown him they were a team. A good team. 'Dad, you're calling a meeting.'

'What for?'

'Twins, I've got a job for you.' Jake winked at the pair who sat up eagerly. 'I want you two to go and tell Tom that Grandpa wants a

meeting to talk to everyone in half an hour in the muster room. Can you do that?’

‘Yes.’ Their little heads bobbed up and down like toy emus sitting on a dusty ute’s dashboard.

Jake opened the screen door, turned on the outdoor lights as the twins’ chairs scraped across the kitchen floor. ‘Off you go.’

‘But they haven’t finished their dinner,’ said Jess.

‘They can eat when they return. Twins, only talk to Tom, then come straight back. I’ll be watching.’

The young twins burst through the door, quickly slipping on their boots.

Their childish laughter echoed as they raced across the compound, the stars sparkling above them. They rushed up the muster room’s wooden steps, barrelled through the double screen doors and straight to Tom, the trusty 2IC, seated at the table closest to the door.

Tom was bombarded with the news. Then his niece and nephew rushed out the door with Tom following.

Jake waved to Tom at the muster room’s screen doors, who gave a nod, then turned to face those seated, his strong no-nonsense voice echoing. *‘Meeting, muster room, thirty minutes. Be there.’*

Within seconds, the first out the door to spread the news was Elliott, the trainee muster cook, dashing for the cottages. Next was Josh, the jackaroo, who headed for the stockmen’s quarters. While

Jake held the door open for the twins as they came huffing and puffing up the stairs. And that's how the bush telegraph ran at Danbunnan Station.

'Good job, twins. Let's finish dinner and go to the meeting.'

'Us too?' Aaron dropped into his seat, while his sister brushed back her plaits.

'No, honey, that's for the staff,' said Jess.

'This involves everyone, Jess. You and the twins should come,' said Jake, returning to his seat.

'*Why are you doing this, Jake?*' Barked out Bob, red in the face.

Gone was the newly acquired *son* tag. His father's chiselled lines of the old boss shining through.

'You're the one who accepted the nomination, not me, so you can tell the staff.' That was what Bob used to do. He ordered. Barked. Never asked, only shouting his demands, and it was never open for discussion. That was the old boss, who Jake had feared as a child. But not anymore.

'This doesn't concern them.' Bob pursed his lips whitening with rage.

'Yes, it does.'

'How? They're just staff!'

He was sick to death of that term. Jake had heard Sienna say she was just staff, when she meant so much more to him. 'Who's going to do the extra work? Not me, I'm busy, and they are too.'

‘But—’

‘Look, Dad ...’ Jake took a deep breath to calm not only himself but also his father before they screamed the plaster off the walls. As a kid he hated his dad shouting the fear into him, so he wasn’t going to do that in front of his nephew and niece.

Jake didn’t want Bob to take over either, but he also didn’t want him to return to his zombified status on the couch. He wanted to show Bob how much Danbunnan had changed for the better—or so he’d hoped. ‘You can tell everyone you’ve accepted the competition’s nomination.’

‘Why? It doesn’t concern them.’

‘That’s our skeleton crew down there, now the contractors have gone. Those people in that muster room care what happens to Danbunnan and treat this place as if it was their home. So why not let everyone decide if they want to be involved. You do realise, Dad, the men running that competition are only here to see how they can buy us out. They’ve blocked all avenues for us to sell our beef in the co-op, except through your mate Simon Simmons. They know I can’t afford to do this and, somehow, they must know this muster is it for us.’

‘Is it that bad, Jake?’ Jess asked.

He didn’t want to worry his sister, or his niece and nephew either, but he wasn’t going to lie to them. ‘Not yet. I won’t let it come to that.’ Not when he’d been working with Sienna on his secret

project. But it wasn't enough. 'Dad, can you see why I'm saying no?'

'I had no idea it was that bad.'

'Yeah, you did. You just didn't want to admit it.' Jake stood from the table. 'I'm going to have a quick shower. Dad, start thinking about what you want to say. If you want this, you'll have to sell it to the crew, not me, because I'm voting no.' Jake walked out with a sick knot in his stomach. He was sick of people forcing his hand, especially his father who still didn't listen to him. He'd already accepted it was going to cost him his happiness, which was only snippets of secreted time left with Sienna. But he'd sworn to his dying mother that he'd save the station and there was no way he was going to surrender Danbunnan, not today. Not ever, if he could help it.

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