

a place where every heart matters

Doctoring
DUST

THE ELSIE CREEK SERIES



MEL A ROWE

DOCTORING DUST

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Also by 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

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.

One

He traced one thick finger down her forearm, sending her nerves into hyper-drive as a pleasurable shiver licked its way up to her shoulders. It pushed a warmth of pleasure so deep into her bones she forgot the world, the universe, even how to breathe.

Except through his kiss.

A kiss that was so soft, so warm, so deliciously clever, it only stirred her cravings deeper with desire. She gripped his shoulders to steady herself under the sweep of emotions, undone by the way his tongue caressed her lips. Leaving her to forget everything but how to touch. Taste. Hear. See. The love of him. That was everything. With this man. Who—

The joey poked her head out of the pouch, dragging Alice Meadows from the story, with the book precariously held open in her lap.

‘Melody, I was really getting into that.’ Alice inhaled deeply to calm the heat inside, shifting the baby carrier resting across her chest, ready to read more. *This book is getting good.*

But the pleading eyes of the baby wallaby sucked her in.

‘Fine, last feed for the night.’

Flinging out of her rocking chair, Alice placed the novel on

the shelf of her nearby wall-to-ceiling bookcases. The wooden floorboards in the living room creaked under her workboots. Tonight, it somehow seemed louder than normal.

As the microwave whirred in the background, heating the formula, she stood in her darkened kitchen and glanced out the window. From her elevated house, Alice saw everything on this side of town. It was an industrial area that rarely got any traffic, even during normal business hours, and nothing after dark. In the daytime her kitchen window's view stretched over the fire station to the nearby airfield, and the stockyards beyond, where road trains filled with cattle would glide like a brown snake shifting across the outback sands to meet the freight trains.

But the only thing worth watching at this time of night was the town doctor, Doctor Stewart Mannen. The Hot Doc.

Leaning her hip against the kitchen sink, Alice plucked a fresh strawberry from a bowl. The berry was so sweet and perfectly ripe against her tongue—her dessert, perfectly timed to enjoy as she admired Stewart's sturdy stride.

At the same time, every night, he'd walk the road from the hospital like a ghost. A blond-haired, mouth-wateringly hot and honeyed ghost, with a look that made her toes curl, making her suck harder on the tart-yet-sweet juice from her plump, homegrown strawberry.

As the town's most eligible bachelor, Stewart was a prize catch for someone special. Pity he didn't know she existed.

Come on, the guy was a big-city surgeon. While she was nothing more than a woman wearing a uniform of khaki grunge, who everyone called the *new* ranger.

Ding.

She opened the microwave and gave the baby bottle a good shake.

Melody excitedly shifted in her baby pouch with one of her long wallaby toes jabbing Alice in the ribs.

'Oi! Watch those paws, kiddo.' Alice winced at the sharp pain, readjusting the baby carrier that had seen better days. It was so well used, she'd forgotten how many she'd carried over the years. *See, not a new ranger.*

Alice dabbed a few drops of the milky formula against her wrist. The perfect temperature. 'Here you go, Melody.'

At least the wallaby could hold the bottle these days.

'Shall we get back to the story? I have a TBR pile I want to get control of.' The pile of books waiting to be read was as big as the side table that stood next to her rocking chair.

Scooping up her romance novel, she headed to her chair, keen to read all about her latest book boyfriend—who somehow, always, ended up looking like the Hot Doc in her imagination.

As Melody snuggled deeper into her makeshift pouch, Alice noticed the dry dirt on her uniform. Maybe she should run a bath and read another chapter while soaking—

The floor creaked. Loudly. As if a microphone was pressed to the floor, with the stereo sound echoing down the corridor to the bedrooms.

The little joey stopped suckling, creating a resounding *plop* as she dragged her mouth free from the baby bottle's teat. Wide-eyed and alert, her big ears twitched, scanning the room like a radar at an air force base.

Alice always trusted the instincts of an animal, no matter how young.

Especially when she felt it too.

Her eyes widened as the wooden floorboards shifted beneath the soles of her boots.

With her heart hammering, she gently shifted her weight, but that was met with a series of groans. She stopped breathing.

Seconds seemed like hours as she waited.

But then there was a large snap, and the floorboard panel splintered into cracks that followed the wood grains. She went to jump—and that was when the floor collapsed.

'Augh!' Alice fell through the hole in the living room floor.

Only to jerk quickly to a stop as she became wedged in the hole, with floating dust irritating her eyes. The stench of old dry wood and sawdust made her want to sneeze, as her ribs were squeezed tight by the broken floorboards scratching at her stomach, where she was stuck in the middle of the floor with a baby wallaby in her face.

'Gimme a break!' Alice tried to wriggle free, but the straps of the baby carrier were snagged on the jagged edges of the floorboards.

Determined, she tried to swing her legs to catch on something to push herself up.

Then there was another loud creak.

This time, she felt it through her bones as the sharp boards pressed against her ribcage.

But what stopped all movement as pure ice rushed through her veins was her wall-to-ceiling bookcases.

All four of them were now leaning towards her. On the top shelves, her most prized hardcover book trophies slowly slid off the edge, one by one, as if pushed by some invisible fairy. They spilled around her head, crushing pages, snapping spines. She cringed, holding the baby carrier closer to her hammering chest, where the baby wallaby's instinct was to burrow deeper inside. With one arm protecting her head, the books rained down around her.

She swallowed hard, forcing down the acidic taste of fear, while ignoring the pounding whoosh of blood in her ears that competed with the spine-tingling creaking of the wood pushing against her ribs.

A line of sweat trickled down her brow as she tried to find her courage or a solution.

Death by bestsellers? Hmm, how would that read in the morning news?

'HELP!'

But who would hear her out here, when she lived alone?

Two

Six weeks to go and Stewart would be free from this outback hellhole of red dust, cattle, and extreme weather conditions. He kicked at a stone. It rolled down the dark road that ran from the small bush hospital to the outback highway.

Highway? Ha. There was no such thing as traffic jams in this place where time slowed down to a freakish crawl, dragging boredom along with it.

Sent here against his free will, by his old bosses, but in six weeks he'd be back amongst the gritty city's chaos, working back in his old hospital that was bigger than this town's main street. Back in a workplace where you'd walk in the door on a Friday morning, blink, and it'd be Monday night when you left.

Here, in Elsie Creek, as a surgeon stuck in the outback—pfft!

Sure, it had its challenges, from farmers to cowboys playing with trucks, tractors and livestock. Most of the time it was dehydrated, sunburnt tourists, a few elderly patients on hospice, and children doing childish things.

It was nothing compared to the cut and dice world of limbs, aches, and ailments you got from working in a big city hospital. A place built to serve over a million city-dwelling souls who didn't

get along with their neighbours.

Here, in this tiny town, they'd bake cakes for their neighbours.

Most of all, they were in his face. All the time. Period.

The locals in Elsie Creek knew who he was, that he was stuck here on a limited-time only contract, as well as who and what he was working on. All while trying to set him up with Daisy May's milkmaid cousin, daughter, granddaughter, niece and second-whatever. It's where he'd tell them all the same answer: *I'm not getting involved with anyone because I'm only here to finish my contract. Period.*

Six weeks to go.

'Heeeeeeeelp!'

Head down, Stewart focused on the red dirt and listened harder.

'Hello? Is somebody out there? I need help!' It was a female voice.

Stewart searched the thick cloak of darkness. Before him was the road to town, then the railway line and empty stockyards. Beyond that was nothing but scrublands. On his left stood the silent airfield, perched on the edge of the outback. The council buildings and some other businesses were on the right, but they were all closed. Behind him was the hospital at the end of the road shared by the police and fire departments.

'HELP!'

Was a woman locked up in the police station?

'Please help or *I'm gonna die!*' The level of distress was clear in her voice.

'Where are you?' His footsteps echoed down the tarred road, passing the silent fire station. As he passed the police station, his shadow lengthened from the bright spotlights positioned on the roof.

'I'm at the ranger station.'

Pausing to get his bearings in the dark, his eyes landed on the beefy four-wheel drive parked under the elevated house that stood a little off the road. He ran down the driveway where the low light shone from the house upstairs. 'I'm here.'

'Oh, joy. Me too.'

He skidded in the soft dirt, coming face to face with a pair of boots at the end of khaki cargo pants that hung low enough on the hips of a woman to show the pink lace panties she was wearing. Her flat stomach was exposed, showing the edge of her lacy pink bra. *Matching underwear! For real? In this town.*

'That's not the doctor, is it?'

He grinned. 'Are you the new ranger?'

'Hey, I've been in this town longer than you.'

His grin grew wider. He'd seen the woman around town. Did she have a temper to match her fire-red hair? 'Well, I'm right beneath you.' He gently gripped her ankles, putting her sturdy workboots on his shoulders. 'Can you come down using my weight?'

'I'm caught on something, otherwise I would have lowered myself.'

Based on the tight muscles of her stomach, she was fit enough to do a dozen chin lifts for fun.

'The front door is open. Or do you need a formal invitation,

Doctor?’

He raced up the front steps as the entire house creaked and shifted like a boat at sea.

‘SLOWLY.’ Her voice was laced with fear as the house moaned and twisted as if it was about to fall like a house of cards.

He pulled out his phone. ‘Sit tight, Ranger—’

‘My name is Alice, Doctor Mannen.’

‘Stewart. I’m calling for help.’ He pressed dial as he pushed open the front door and his jaw dropped at the scene.

Poor Alice was stuck in the floor with a group of bookcases leaning precariously over her head. If they fell, she was ...

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