

Bestselling Author
RACHAEL JOHNS

A story of mystery,
heartache and hope.

Outback
GHOST

Chapter One

Twenty years ago Adam Burton had been playing in this very spot with not a care in the world on his shoulders. He'd been making mud pies out of the sludge in the bottom of the nearest dam, piling them up high and then shooting them down with his hand-made catapult. His sister had been helping him – he remembered her girly pink T-shirt had been soaked with mud – but then...

He didn't understand what had happened next. He vaguely remembered his catapult breaking and the focus it took to fix it. Could barely have been five minutes though and when he looked up, she was gone. Even now, whenever he thought of it, his heart thudded exactly as it had done that day.

He'd searched the area surrounding him, screaming her name and running faster than his legs had ever carried him before. There was barely any water in the dam but he ran all around it anyway, peering in desperation into the middle. But it was like she'd gone 'poof' and vanished into thin air. She could have gotten bored and walked back to the homestead, but even then something in his gut, in his heart, told him something real bad had happened.

When he'd eventually gone home to break the news to his mum that he'd lost his seven year old sister, snot, dirt and tears were meshed together on his face and his ten year old legs and arms were covered in scratches from all the times he'd fallen in his haste. He'd been sobbing so hard it had taken an age for him to get the words out. Mum hadn't been mad. She'd sat him at the kitchen table, wiped his face with a wet dishcloth, poured him a glass of milk and then gone to radio his father who'd been at the other side of the farm harvesting the wheat crop. There weren't many things that could drag a farmer from his harvest but the disappearance of his seven year old daughter was one of them.

Adam remembered the horrors of what followed like it was a movie he'd watched a hundred times over – the police, the search and rescue volunteers, even an Aboriginal tracker. And then, when no sign was found of her, the local minister, the journalists and the extended family members arrived. Even though it was Adam who'd last seen his sister, his parents had been the obvious suspects. He'd never understood how anyone could even contemplate that.

They'd been cleared, of course, but that hadn't made anything better.

Standing alongside his mother and father now, the three of them like a row of weary soldiers, Adam could barely believe it had been two decades since his little sister had gone missing. He looked out across the paddock, which was smack bang in the middle of their 2500-hectare property. Although he kept it fire-brokeed for safety reasons, it hadn't been used since that fateful day. Stupid really, letting a perfectly good paddock go wild, but his father hadn't harvested here and he doubted, now that he was in charge, he ever would either.

Some things were sacred. And in lieu of a gravesite they could visit to lay flowers and pay their respect, this was all they had.

He came here often and he knew his parents did too. They all mourned in their own different ways, but once a year, on the anniversary of the day she'd disappeared, they came together in the morning and scattered lilies on the ground. They used to talk when they came, share memories, but now they stood in silence; no doubt all thinking about what *could* have been.

The memories had faded, the hole filled in by grief in its most destructive form.

Adam had to think so hard it hurt his head to remember his sister's endless giggles, her messy golden ringlets and that unrelenting smile that drew two perfect dimples in her cheeks. No doubt she'd annoyed him as younger siblings were prone to do but if that were the case, it was just one more thing he couldn't remember.

His dad, Dave, had wanted to clear a bit of land properly here and erect some kind of memorial but his mum, Esther, had never allowed it. She believed doing such a thing would be akin to giving up hope and, although you wouldn't believe it to look at her, apparently she still had that in her heart.

Guilt enveloped Adam at that thought because for years he'd wished for a body to be found. It seemed near impossible anyone could be found alive after all these years, but Lord knew they needed some kind of closure. He glanced sideways at his mum and then looked away again quickly. What he saw hurt too damn much. She seemed to have faded over the years, now merely a frail frame of sallow skin and bones, which made her look far older than her fifty-five years. Very occasionally, snatches of the woman she used to be shone through. He'd seen her have a moment with the stray cat that wandered the farm and when he'd been renovating an old cottage on their property earlier this year, she'd briefly shown enthusiasm about the project. But 'brief' was the word. It was always the same... one step forward and a hundred back.

Just when he thought she might be coming back to them, she drew further into herself. The local doctor and visiting grief counsellor had given up years ago and no matter what Adam or his dad did, nothing worked to bring her out of the shell she'd built around herself.

'Well, I guess we'd better be heading back for breakfast,' she said, breaking the uncomfortable silence. Despite her grief, she'd never stopped fulfilling her duty as a good wife and mother. She cooked (or at least tried to, but she'd never been Nigella Lawson) and cleaned – she just did it all on autopilot. There was no energy there and Adam had to wonder if there was even love anymore.

'Good idea.' Dave nodded, pulled his hands out of the pockets they'd been hiding in for a good half hour and adjusted his faithful Akubra hat.

Adam didn't feel like sitting around his parents' table trying to make small talk as they ate over-cooked scrambled eggs and burnt bacon but it was something they did every year on this day and he didn't want to hurt his mother's feelings. 'I can't stay long, harvest waits for no man.'

Without another word, the three of them piled into Adam's ute and he drove them back to the main homestead where his parents still lived. A few years back, after being one of *Cleo* Magazine's Bachelors of the Year, he'd scored a couple of big time modelling gigs and saved enough to build his own house on the property. It wasn't large – he didn't need it to be – but it felt more like home than his parents' place had in the last twenty years. Although his sister's body had never been found, her ghost lived at the homestead. Photos of her hung on every wall and her bedroom was exactly as she'd left it – semi-naked Barbie dolls strewn all over the pink carpet. If she were here now, those dolls would probably cause great embarrassment.

Then, again, if she were here now, everything would be different.

‘Harvest going well then?’ his father asked as he scraped back a chair and sat down at the kitchen table. His question was an obvious attempt to find a safe topic of conversation.

Adam nodded from where he was scrubbing his hands at the sink. ‘Yeah, think so. Still, weird without you out there, though.’

‘You’ve got a couple of blokes helping though, haven’t you?’

‘Yeah, we’ve got plenty of manpower, but...’ His voice drifted off. The truth was he couldn’t understand why his dad had decided to step down and take a back seat on the farm earlier this year. Not working meant more time cooped up in the house with sad memories and an even sadder wife. He worried about what that would do to his dad, who had at least tried to get on with his life.

They ate breakfast in relative silence, forks scraping against the china plates and the sound of the dogs scrapping on the veranda. His sister’s presence sat like an elephant at the table, but they’d long ago stopped talking about her. Adam couldn’t remember if it had been an actual decision or sharing the memories had become too painful. Either way, no one ever mentioned her, and without her it seemed they had little left to say to each other.

That was one of the reasons he’d suggested renovating his late uncle’s cottage, which was the third residence on the farm, and turning it into farmstay tourist accommodation. It had worked for a while – earlier this year, he’d gone over the plans with his parents and his mum had even gotten involved with the interior decorating. While they had paint colours, tiles and curtain styles to choose, there’d been plenty to talk about. He’d hoped the guests that came to stay in the cottage would also become an interest for her. Unfortunately, so far they’d had extremely bad luck in that department.

Finally, their dishes were bare and Adam pushed his chair back to stand.

Gathering his dirty plate, cutlery and mug, he said, 'I'll do the dishes. Thanks for breakfast, Mum.'

'No, it's fine,' she replied, standing also. 'You've got more to do than I have, you get back into it and I'll take my time clearing the kitchen.'

He should probably have argued, insisted on helping, but the truth was he wanted to escape the oppressive mood that hung in the air here. And he did have work to do. He'd been on the header half the night and back there at first light this morning but they still had a good few weeks of days like that to go.

'Thanks.' He leaned forward and kissed his mum on the cheek, gave his dad a brief wave and then headed out, whistling to Mutton as he went.

He opened the door of his ute and his new Kelpie pup jumped up and through onto the passenger seat. He was still so little and Adam didn't like the thought of him skidding around on the ute's back tray.

Although a day of work lay ahead, Adam went home first. He didn't usually drink at this time of the morning; hell, he didn't usually drink much at all, but right now, he needed something. Mutton leapt out of the ute and bounded around the home paddock like a chook with his head cut off. Leaving the pup to play, Adam kicked his boots off at the front door, then went straight through to the kitchen and retrieved a bottle of whisky from the back of a cupboard.

Just one drink, a few moments to think about his sister on his own, and then, he'd be okay to face the day. He took his measure of amber fluid in a plastic tumbler outside and sat down on the top step of the veranda. After a quick sip, he cradled the cup in his hands and looked out over the horizon. Annadale Farm – named

after his dad's grandparents Anna and Dale – was big enough that he couldn't see his parents' house or the old cottage from here. He liked the solitude that offered and at this time of the year, he liked looking out across the paddocks and seeing the wheat and canola crops about to be harvested. There was wealth in it. Not for the money it would bring but the richness of the fertile earth.

He took another sip and then looked up at the sound of a vehicle approaching. He frowned as his dad's ute came into view, red dust blowing up behind it. Resting the tumbler on the top step beside him, Adam stood. His dad rarely came visiting and they'd been together less than five minutes ago.

'Hey Dad,' he called, raising a hand as Dave slammed the ute's door and started towards the house. 'Is there a problem?'

He didn't reply straightaway, but the lines on his brow indicated something was definitely on his mind. 'Is that what I think it is?' Dave gestured to the tumbler as he stepped onto the veranda.

Adam nodded. 'Can I get you one?'

'I'd kill for it.'

Racking his mind for what his father could have to say, Adam went back into the house and poured another measure of whisky. In a way, he was closer to his dad than he was to his mum. The two of them often talked about farming strategies and the latest advances in agricultural technology, but since his dad retired their chats had been less frequent. Adam knew Dave was doing his damn best not to interfere but the truth was he missed his input, missed having someone to bounce around ideas with.

'Here you are,' he said as he stepped back outside and offered his dad a glass.

'Thanks.' Dave took it, smiled awkwardly and raised the drink to his lips. Adam watched as he took a sip. He got the feeling his dad had bad news and he wished he'd just come right out and say it, but Dave never liked to be rushed.

‘It’s a good crop this year,’ he said eventually.

‘Yes,’ Adam agreed, certain his father hadn’t come to talk about this. ‘It looked touch and go for a while there but in the end Mother Nature did her bit.’

‘You’ve done me proud, son.’ Dave turned his head and Adam noted the moisture in his father’s eyes. His gut tightened. Was he sick or something?

‘Thanks,’ he managed, feeling strangely emotional. ‘I had the best teacher.’

Dave’s lips lifted slightly. ‘I don’t know about that.’ And then he went quiet again.

‘What’s the matter, Dad?’ Adam asked. ‘Is there something you want to tell me?’

Silence lingered for a few long moments. Adam thought maybe he was overreacting, that maybe Dave just needed a drink like he did and yet hadn’t wanted to have one with Esther.

Then he landed the blow. ‘I’m leaving your mother.’

‘What?’ Things weren’t exactly paradise at the homestead but Adam hadn’t been expecting this.

‘I can’t take it anymore,’ Dave added, while questions whirled around Adam’s head. Was there another woman involved? Where would he go?

He opened his mouth but shock rendered him speechless. Remembering the tumbler on the step, he lurched forward, scooped it up and downed the entire contents in one gulp.

‘I guess this has come as a bit of a shock,’ Dave said.

Adam shot him a glare and finally found his voice. ‘No kidding!’

‘I’m sorry.’ The look in Dave’s eyes said he meant it. He took another sip and then rested his glass on the veranda railing. ‘I loved your mum, I really did, but the woman I married is long gone. And living with a stranger, who barely talks to me, has taken its toll. I miss your sister as much as she does, but I don’t want to live

like this anymore. I hoped if I took early retirement, we could get away from here. Go someplace less toxic, somewhere she could start to heal but we both know how ridiculous that dream is.' He laughed cynically. 'If twenty years aren't enough, she'll never get over it. It's time for me to let it go.'

Adam wanted to argue. He was angry at his dad for taking the easy way out but at the same time he couldn't blame him. Nothing about living with his mum had been easy. She hadn't even left the farm in the last two decades; going further afield would take a miracle.

'O-kay,' he said slowly. 'When are you going? What will you do? Have you told Mum?'

Dave nodded but didn't meet Adam's gaze as he did so. 'Last night. I decided to stay until... well, until after this morning.'

Adam opened his mouth to reply even though he had no idea what to say but his dad went on before he had a chance to speak.

'I'm sorry, son. I've been deliberating over this decision for months. I don't want to leave you in the shit, but it's bloody draining. I've tried to help her, Lord knows I've done my best, but I'm tired of not being enough.'

If Adam understood anything, it was that. He'd had the same thought over and over again throughout the last twenty years. So many times he'd wanted to shout at his mum, that yes, her daughter was gone but she still had a son. Wasn't *he* enough? How about she pay him some attention? Make him feel like her life was worth living because of what she had left?

But, of course, he'd never challenged her because he was responsible for all of this.

For this same reason, he couldn't begrudge his dad leaving now. Even if it would mean the burden of his mother's welfare would lie solely on his shoulders. In essence Adam was the one who'd lost his little sister, so he had to pay the price.



Stella Reynolds laughed, smiled in the rear-view mirror and then joined in with her excited daughter's singing along to the lyrics of 'Summer Holiday' as they travelled north along the Brand Highway. Cliff Richard was her mother's all-time favourite singer and as a child, Stella couldn't help learning all his songs off by heart. Her mother used to play her favourite songs full bore whenever she did the housework and sometimes she'd stop and drag Stella and her little brother up to dance. As a teenager, Stella had pretended to hate this but secretly she'd loved it. Stella smiled wistfully at the happy memory, then sighed. Of course she hadn't heard any Cliff for years but when she'd been packing their things for two long-overdue months in the country, *Summer Holiday* had planted itself in her head and she'd been helpless but to sing.

Heidi, excited because her mother's enthusiasm was infectious, had caught on quickly and it was now her new favourite song. When something was a favourite with Heidi, everyone around her knew about it. That was one of the many things Stella loved about her daughter and one of the many things other people sometimes found confronting.

'Where we going, Mummy?' Heidi spoke from the back seat, where she sat with her favourite pink teddy bear, a yellow rubber duck toy and her imaginary friend Polar taking up the rest of the back seat. Stella had worked hard to fit all their clobber in the boot and in the front passenger seat next to her in order to leave the backseat free for Polar.

'A beautiful little town called Bunyip Bay.' Stella smiled again at the thought of sharing two long months with Heidi. She'd taken her out of school a couple of weeks early because the school Christmas celebrations were done and dusted and Stella had been

so excited at the prospect of finally having time off, she hadn't been able to wait until the holidays officially started.

'There really bunyips?' Heidi asked. 'Polar scared of bunyips.'

'I'm not sure, honey, but if there are, I'm sure they're friendly bunyips. How about we go bunyip hunting first thing tomorrow?'

Another glance in the rear-view mirror showed Heidi's eyes almost as wide as the rim of her glasses. 'You work tomorrow?'

Stella shook her head. 'I don't have to work for two whole months, munchkin.' Thanks to a small advance for a non-fiction book she'd written, she could enjoy some well overdue time off. 'It'll just be you, me, the beach and lots of time to have fun together.'

'Bunyips *and* beach?' Heidi twisted her head to look at the empty seat beside her. 'Hear that Polar? You pack bathers?'

Heidi chatted a few more minutes to her latest in a long line of imaginary friends and then resumed her singing of *Summer Holiday*. Stella absentmindedly joined in, but her mind was full of thoughts of what lay ahead. It felt like she'd been planning this holiday forever and she couldn't wait to arrive.

As a working single mum Stella had never been able to spend as much time with her daughter as she wanted to. All things considered, Heidi was well adjusted and the teachers and other children at her school were like an extended family, but that didn't stop Stella's guilt. She didn't regret any of the decisions she'd made regarding her daughter, but she wished she could offer her more. Not material things – they didn't matter much to a child like Heidi. But time. It wasn't that she hated her work, quite the contrary, but she resented the need to work and the time it took away from Heidi. She'd love to be a stay-at-home-mum but due to lack of support from her family or Heidi's father's family that was impossible. Thankfully Heidi was older now and went to a

fabulous school, because none of her daycare centres had been very good at coping with her needs.

Stella shook her head. She didn't want to waste any time thinking about the past or what could have been, she simply wanted to make the most of the special time they had ahead. She had so many plans for how they would spend the next couple of months – bushwalks, swimming at the beach, just hanging together. And the best part? This Christmas she wouldn't have to work at the restaurant and leave Heidi with very supportive friends.

One such friend, Joanna, who also had a child with special needs, thought Stella was insane for choosing a farmstay cottage for their holiday. When Stella said she couldn't afford a resort, like the one Joanna, her husband and son often stayed in, she'd suggested a caravan park, so Heidi might meet up with other kids. But the truth was, Stella wanted to give Heidi a chance to experience some of what she had growing up in the country. The open space, the fresh air, the animals... And if she were even more honest, she missed living on a farm and hoped the next two months would help ease some of the pain in her heart also.

'Polar needs to wee,' piped up Heidi.

Stella eyed the 'Welcome To Bunyip Bay' sign on the side of the road. 'We're almost there. Can Polar wait ten minutes till we get to the farm?'

Heidi frowned slightly. 'Is animals on farm?'

'It's a sheep and crop farm,' Stella informed, 'so I'm guessing there'll be hundreds of sheep and maybe a couple of working dogs. But there might also be foxes, wild rabbits and if you're lucky, maybe even a kangaroo.' *And snakes and spiders*, she added silently, not wanting to scare her daughter. 'Can you hold going to the toilet a few more minutes?'

'Kay.' Heidi nodded, distracted as she looked out the window as the town they'd call home for next few months came into view.

Stella hadn't been this far north since she was a kid and her family had gone to visit old friends up in Carnavon but the place didn't look like it hadn't changed much in the last couple of decades. A row of shops still stood along the main street – an IGA supermarket, a post office, a café that looked surprisingly funky for the small town, a medical centre, chemist and, of course, the obligatory pub. Not that she'd be spending any time there.

When she'd seen the small cottage for rent on the Internet farmstay site, recollections of that family trip had come rushing back. She remembered they'd stopped for an ice-cream in Bunyip Bay, how she'd been sick of driving and asked why they couldn't just stay here forever. The two-bedroom cottage was only a four and a half hour drive from Perth and sounded simply perfect for them. For years she'd dreamed of giving Heidi the kind of family holiday she'd enjoyed as a child herself. Although estranged from her family now, she couldn't deny her parents had given her a childhood filled with fun and joy and she wanted to give Heidi the same opportunity. She'd held her breath as she entered her details on the online form and waited to see if the cottage was available for the period she required.

It was. And it was a lot cheaper than she'd envisaged, which would mean she wouldn't have to be a scrooge for the two months they were away.

'Bunyip!' Heidi cried.

Stella looked in the mirror to see her daughter pointing towards something coming up on their right. She slowed the car, smiling at the large statue of the mythical creature that stood on the edge of the local park. 'You know what? I think it is. Let's stop and take a photo.'

Heidi, always happy to pose for the camera, had her hand on her seatbelt and practically bounced out of the car the moment Stella went round to help her out. Laughing, she shut the car door,

only to be told seconds later, ‘Mummy, Polar inside. Wants to see Bunyip.’

‘Sorry.’ Stella stifled a smile as she opened the door again. ‘Is she out yet?’ she asked after a few moments.

‘Yes, she’s climbing.’ Heidi ran, giggling, towards the massive Bunyip landmark, presumably after Polar. Whatever Polar was, she must be fast, Stella thought as she closed the door a second time. Although the imaginary friend’s characteristics could change from day to day depending on Heidi’s mood and what else was happening. Polar had been with them for about three months now, which made Stella think she’d be leaving any moment. Usually Heidi’s ‘friends’ only stayed a few months. She wondered who would come next.

Maybe one day Heidi would grow out of these special friends, but Stella didn’t mind them at all. She loved hearing her daughter talk to or about her latest friend because it proved her to be far more complex and intelligent than many gave credit for. Heidi continually proved that it was stupid to try to put any child in a box.

‘Heidi. Polar. Smile!’ Stella yelled, as she held up her iPhone to snap a memory. *The beginning of the best summer of our life.* She let Heidi crawl all over the statue for a little longer, but when she asked if she could play on the climbing frame, Stella shook her head.

‘Sorry, hon, but we can come back soon. We’ll be here all summer, remember?’ She knew if Heidi got on the swing, hours would be lost before she managed to get her off, and she wanted to get to the cottage and settle in before dinnertime.

‘Okay, Mum.’

Stella’s heart turned over in her chest with love and pride as her daughter ran towards her and placed her little hand in hers. Every day with this gorgeous girl was a blessing. Yes, there’d been tough

times but Stella thanked the Lord she'd been strong enough to fight the forces of those who'd tried to take that from her. They took a quick detour to the public conveniences so Polar could go to the toilet and then headed back to the car.

'Shall we let Polar in first?' Stella asked as they arrived at the car and she opened the back door.

'Yes.' Heidi nodded seriously. 'She's lady and ladies go first, don't they, Mummy?'

'They sure do.' Smiling, Stella helped Heidi into the car, clicked her seatbelt into place and then kissed her on the forehead. 'I love you, sweetheart.'

'Love you too, Mummy.'

Stella swallowed the lump in her throat as she slid into the driver's seat and turned the ignition. It was that unconditional, overflowing love that got her up in the mornings. It was what drove her every thought and action, through each and every day and had made her life worth living during the numerous times when everything had seemed too hard.