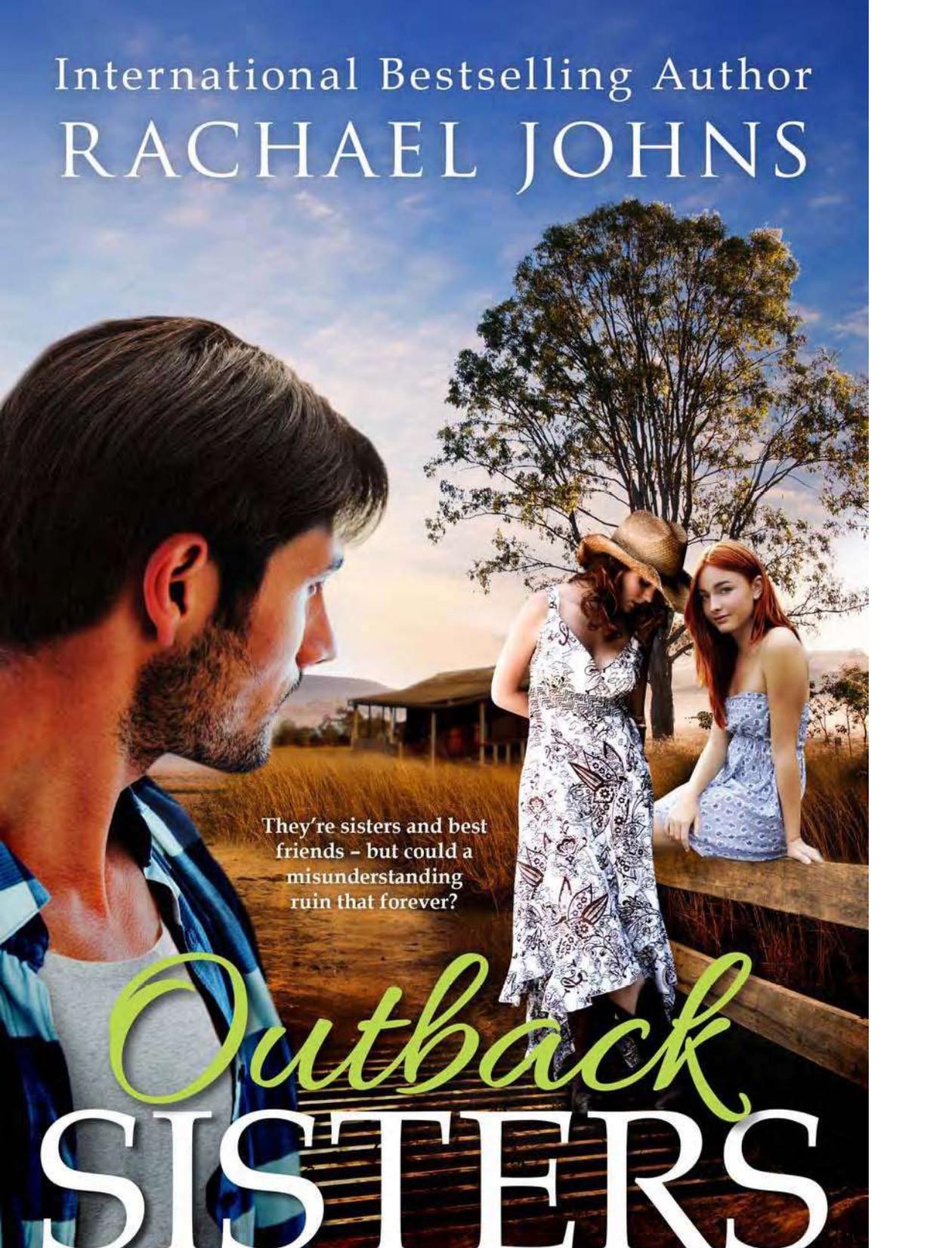


International Bestselling Author
RACHAEL JOHNS



They're sisters and best
friends - but could a
misunderstanding
ruin that forever?

Outback
SISTERS

Outback Sisters

Rachael Johns

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Chapter One

Francesca Madden, known as Frankie to everyone who mattered, closed the café door behind Stella's bridal party and breathed a sigh of relief. With only four weeks to the big day, excitement was really ramping up—but for some reason she was struggling to get into the mood. She slumped in a chair at the table the group had been sitting at and eyed the half-finished chocolate mud cake. While the meeting had been in progress, Frankie had been so busy helping to serve everyone that she hadn't had time to eat. To say she now felt exhausted—emotionally and physically—would be the understatement of the millennium. She sighed and dragged the plate towards her, hoping, as she dug a fork into the cake, that a little chocolate boost would help renew her energies.

It wasn't that she didn't like weddings. She couldn't be happier for her cousin Adam and his soon-to-be blushing bride, Stella. If any two people deserved happiness it was them, but they weren't the only loved-up couples around here—her thoughts drifted to Faith and Monty, Ruby and Drew, Ryan and Grant; even her niece Harriet had herself a high-school sweetheart, for crying out loud. In fact, it was starting to feel like everyone in the world—or

at least in Bunyip Bay—was getting a happy ever after.

Everyone, that is, except her.

Oh, and Simone, but at least her big sister had once experienced the blessing of true love. Although Simone had been widowed for almost ten years, she knew what it felt like to be the centre of someone's world, to be the last thing someone wanted to see when they went to bed and the person they couldn't wait to wake up to in the morning.

Was it wrong that Frankie wanted that too? She had good health and a wonderful business and that was a lot more than some people. Shouldn't the café, her friends and family be enough? She shoved more chocolate cake into her mouth just as one of her waitresses stuck her head out from behind the counter.

'Are you okay if I head off now?' Stacey asked as she scribbled down her hours on the staff clipboard.

Frankie glanced around the café, noted the two elderly diners still nursing cups of tea, decided she could handle them on her own, and hurried to swallow her mouthful. 'Yeah,' she said as she stood and started to collect the plates from the table. 'Thanks for all your help today.'

'No worries. I'll see you Tuesday.' Stacey whipped off her apron, grabbed her bag from under the counter, released her long, wavy, blonde hair from her café cap and all but skipped out the door. It wasn't that she didn't like her job, but rather she had a date with the new vet that she'd been looking forward to all week. Frankie couldn't blame her—Dr Mitchell Clarke was undeniably hot, *and* good with animals. What was there not to love? She lifted a hand to wave. 'Have fun.'

See? Love was everywhere, except she must be in some kind of bubble because no-one had asked her on a date in what felt like forever. All the local guys treated her like a good friend. Maybe she needed to go further afield—jet

off on a Contiki tour or something and find romance on foreign shores—because it didn't look like Mr Right was going to come to her. But where would that leave the café?

Telling herself to stop being a sorry-for-herself grump, she finished clearing the table, asked Dolce and Mrs Brady if they wanted refills, silently cheered when they declined and then went to grab a cloth to start the evening wipe down. Frankie was about to begin on the table she'd been sitting at when the door to the café squeaked loudly, signalling another customer. She fixed a smile on her face, despite the fact it was nearly closing time and she was already thinking about curling up on her couch, reading *Picnic at Hanging Rock* with her kittens for company. Halfway to becoming a crazy cat woman, that's what she was.

She opened her mouth to begrudgingly welcome this latecomer but the greeting died on her tongue. Standing in the doorway, his tall, incredibly buff body filling the space, was without a doubt the hottest guy she'd ever laid eyes on. About her age, or maybe a few years older, he wore faded jeans, a navy blue chambray shirt with sleeves pushed up to his elbows and heavy, brown boots—classic farmer attire.

Well, hello there! No farmer around these parts had ever made her stomach flutter the way looking at this guy did. He couldn't be a local because she'd lived in Bunyip Bay all her life and if there was a specimen like this in the region without her knowing ... well, that was impossible. His dirty blond hair was cropped close to his head and she had a crazy urge to run right over and sweep her fingers through it. Maybe the sugar had gone to her head.

'Hey there.'

As he spoke, she glanced behind her to check he wasn't talking to a customer she'd missed sneak in, but unless said customer was invisible, he was speaking to her. She turned back and he hit her with a sexy grin that made

her feel like she was the centre of his world, which was ridiculous because they'd only just met. Well, technically they hadn't even done that yet but this had to be love at first sight. She felt giddy, like her knees were about to fail her. Visions of puffy white dresses danced in her head.

'Um ... Hi ...' she stuttered, straightening to a stand as she summoned a smile. *Don't blow this, Frankie. First impressions and everything.* 'What can I get for you?'

In reply, this tall, dashing hunk of a man closed the short distance between them, put his hands on either side of her face, drew her towards him and then lowered his mouth to hers. Her eyes widened as heat flooded from her long-ignored lips right through her body. Places that hadn't felt a man's touch in years lit up and burned. His three-day stubble felt deliciously rough against her chin and she couldn't help but whimper.

Is this a dream? A divinely inappropriate but wonderful dream? If so, she didn't want to ever wake up.

Somewhere—it sounded very, very far away—she vaguely registered the disapproving tutting of the two old women, and the mundane reality of her everyday life threatened to intrude.

Who was this guy? He was the epitome of all she'd ever fantasised about in a man: tall, ruggedly handsome, desperately sexy ... but she didn't know him at all. He could be a crazed psycho or an axe murderer for all she knew. A tiny voice told her she should slap him in the face and ask him what he was doing, but that would mean ripping her lips from his, and that would be an atrocity. Whatever this was, she couldn't bear to break the illusion of bliss, so instead, she wrapped her arms around the handsome stranger and pressed her body against his. To hell with local gossips like Dolce and Mrs Brady; hot men and bone-melting kisses like this didn't come along everyday.

He was all firm muscle and yummy hardness and for a few brief seconds, Frankie thought that maybe her luck really had changed. Maybe it was fate that had brought this man of men into her café late on a Friday afternoon. Stranger things had happened at sea, right?

And then he pulled back.

She swallowed a moan of disappointment and pressed a hand against her chest to try to slow her racing heart.

His face was still only centimetres from hers. He had the most beautiful big brown eyes she'd ever seen. 'Hello, Simone,' he whispered. 'It's so great to finally meet you.'

'What?' she cried, stumbling back and bumping awkwardly into the hard corner of a table. Ignoring the pain, she glared at him. 'I'm Frankie!'

'Huh?' He jerked his head back as if she'd slapped him. He couldn't have looked more surprised if she'd admitted to being Frankenstein's monster. And he wasn't quite as handsome with that scowl on his face either.

Of course it had been too good to be true. But hang on, why would a man like him be kissing Simone? As far as Frankie knew—and Simone had always told her everything—her sister didn't have a man in her life. After the recent debacle with Ryan Forrester, Simone had all but sworn off men, deciding that she'd been blessed with love once and that was enough.

'Who are you?' Frankie practically hissed, her heart still racing but now for entirely different, less pleasurable reasons.

'Oh, you must be the sister,' he said, a sheepish smile forming on his face. 'Whoops.'

'Whoops?' Frankie tried to ignore how adorable he looked as he ran a hand through his already mussed-up hair.

'I'm sorry.' Whatever-his-name-was held out a hand. 'I'm Logan. Logan Knight?' He spoke as if this name should ring a bell, but she came up blank.

When she simply continued glaring at him, he slipped his hand into his jeans pocket and elaborated. ‘Simone’s friend? We’ve been online dating for a couple of weeks now. I was driving home from Perth today and thought I’d surprise her. You two could almost pass as twins.’

There was so much alien information in those few lines that Frankie needed a moment. *Online dating? Twins?* She pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. Maybe she was still dreaming because this conversation was getting weirder by the second.

‘Simone *is* your sister?’ he asked, sounding a little less certain. ‘She *does* work here?’

‘Yes and yes.’ At least Frankie could answer that without thought.

‘Shit.’ A crestfallen expression appeared on Logan’s face. He cleared his throat. ‘I’m really sorry about ... you know. I don’t usually do things like that, but well, when I saw you, I just kind of—’

‘It’s okay.’ Frankie held up a hand and tried to make a joke. ‘You wouldn’t believe the number of random hot guys who come in here and kiss me.’

When Logan blushed and looked as if he wasn’t sure whether to laugh or not, she gave up the attempt. ‘You only just missed her. She’s probably at home by now. Maybe you could go see her there.’

‘I don’t actually know where she lives ... or have her number.’ He looked a little embarrassed and Frankie couldn’t help but find it cute. ‘We’ve only spoken via email. She told me she lives in Bun-yip Bay and works here sometimes, so I thought I’d try my luck.’

Frankie nodded. At least it looked like Simone wasn’t about to tie the knot without telling her.

‘She’s never mentioned me?’

‘She may have,’ Frankie lied. ‘I’ve been a little distracted lately. Let me call her for you.’

Leaving Mr Gorgeous looking a little like a lost puppy, Frankie walked into the kitchen, yanking her mobile phone out of her apron pocket as she went. She generally spoke to Simone four or five times a day, so she was the last person on her recent calls list. She pressed 'call' and drummed the fingernails of her free hand on the kitchen counter as she waited for her sister to pick up.

'I am in teenage daughter hell,' Simone said the moment she answered. 'Harriet wants Jaxon to sleep over tomorrow night. Can you believe it? She's only sixteen for fuck's sake but apparently *I'm* being unreasonable. Can you come over and try to—'

Usually Frankie sympathised with Simone's parenting woes. Although she had no children of her own, everyone knew teenagers were hard work and parenting them alone could be hell. But right now, she had other issues.

'When were you going to tell me you've been online dating?' Frankie interrupted, unable to keep the hurt from her voice. She didn't know why Simone hadn't confided in her.

'Excuse me?' Simone sounded outraged. 'What are you talking about?'

'Your boyfriend just arrived at the café looking for you.' Frankie didn't mention the mistaken identity or the toe-curling kiss that had followed. Her lips still tingled from that kiss. She didn't know if she'd ever recover.

'Boyfriend?'

'You know, Logan? Six foot tall, blond, looks like he's chiselled from a block of marble?'

'Have you been drinking? I have no idea what you are talking about.'

Simone had never been a good liar and from the tone of her voice, Frankie could tell this was the truth. She glanced through the hatch from the kitchen into the café and saw that Logan had found a copy of the latest *Bunyip News* and was sitting on the couch, flicking through it. Man, he was divine. And there was just something extra hot about guys who read: newspapers, books—

she wasn't fussy. The beady eyes of Dolce and Mrs Brady, the town's famous gossips, were glued on him and she could only imagine what they were making of this crazy scene. She sighed and gave Simone a condensed, G-rated version of what had just occurred.

'I promise you I've never heard of the man,' Simone exclaimed. 'And I've certainly never signed up to any online dating site. Haven't you heard the horror stories? No-one uses their real photos, everyone lies about their age and their hobbies. If I was that desperate I'd go to one of those speed-dating sessions. At least then you see the person and they can't pretend to be someone they're not.'

All that might be true but it didn't solve the problem of what to do with Logan Knight. 'Well, I don't know where he got your details,' Frankie interrupted, 'but I assure you he's very real, and he seems to know you. What do you want me to tell him?'

Simone swore and Frankie heard a commotion in the background. Her grip tightened on her phone. 'What?'

'Oh no,' Simone gasped. 'You didn't!'

Frankie listened a moment and heard the terror-filled voices of her teenage nieces.

'We didn't mean any harm, Mum,' came Harriet's voice.

'We just want you to be happy,' added sweet little Grace.

'What's going on?' Frankie demanded.

Simone let out an angry puff of air. 'It seems, unbeknownst to me, I *have* been online dating. Sorry, sis, I've got to go. I'm going to grill my daughters, then I'm going to lecture them on the dangers of talking to strangers online, and *then* I'm going to murder them. You'll bail me out of jail, right?'

'No, wait,' Frankie blurted before Simone could disconnect, and then she lowered her voice. 'Logan wants to meet you.'

Simone snorted. ‘You’ll just have to tell him it’s all a big mistake. I’m sure he has a bevy of other online girlfriends to fall back on.’

Frankie shifted from one foot to the other. After the embarrassment of the kiss, she didn’t want to go out there and make him feel like even more of an idiot. How would he feel knowing he’d been duped by two teenaged girls?

‘I think you should meet him,’ she found herself saying.

‘What? Geez!’ Simone groaned. ‘I’m being ambushed from all directions.’

Frankie heard her nieces in the background. ‘Go meet Logan, Mum. He’s lovely.’

‘He seems to be,’ Frankie conceded, looking again through the hatch to perve on the man in question. Maybe he had a twin brother? It was hard to imagine there could be two men like him on the planet, but ... not totally impossible.

‘Is he really that hot?’ Simone’s question jolted Frankie’s thoughts.

She sighed, still staring at him. Logan glanced up, caught her looking and waved. Her heart did some sort of gymnastics in her chest. ‘Hot doesn’t even begin to cover it.’

‘Why do I think I’m going to live to regret this?’ Simone asked, and then, ‘Tell him I can meet him at the pub in an hour.’

Logan put down the newspaper as Frankie emerged from the kitchen. He couldn’t believe he’d waltzed in here and kissed her before bothering to introduce himself. He was surprised she hadn’t slapped him in the face and he certainly wouldn’t have blamed her if she had. What had he been thinking?

He hadn’t been, that’s what. Instead he’d been overcome with something he’d never felt before. He’d always been impulsive, something Angus felt a constant urge to point out, but what he’d just done was taking things to

extremes. If he told his brother about this later, he would omit the kiss. Maybe it was his recent diagnosis wreaking havoc with his emotions or maybe it was simply because Simone's sister was possibly the sexiest woman he'd ever met. She wasn't classically good-looking—not the type that graced movie screens or fashion magazines—but she possessed a natural beauty that shone from somewhere deep within. The little black apron wrapped around her waist, red T-shirt with *Frankie's* scrawled in black across one breast and the skinny faded jeans clinging to her legs highlighted her curvy body. He couldn't help but remember the feel of it pressed against him.

As she walked towards him now, her pale cheeks glowed a pretty red and her hair—a deep rich crimson—hung in a long, practical, but ever so sexy plait over one shoulder. She was like Anne of Green Gables all grown up, and he had a sudden urge to play Gilbert Blythe.

'Simone says she'll meet you at the pub in an hour,' Frankie said, picking up the cloth she'd dumped on a table when he'd walked in. 'Do you know where The Palace is?'

He smiled, hoping to relax her, as she seemed a little jittery. 'Just down the road on the right, yeah?' He felt the need to explain that he was a relative local—so she wouldn't take him for a stalker or anything. 'My family has a farm at Mingenew, so I've been through Bunyip Bay before.'

She nodded and started to wipe the table. 'When you say "family"—you're not married, are you? I don't mean to be rude but you hear all kind of horror stories about online dating and if you hurt Simone, well, don't take this the wrong way, but I'll kill you.'

Logan chuckled at her deadpan tone. It was clear she wasn't joking and he liked that she valued family as much as he did. 'No, I'm not married. Not anymore, anyway.'

‘Good.’ She turned and he followed her gaze to see two elderly women—the only customers in the café—watching them with great interest. Dropping the cloth again, Frankie crossed to the women and all but shoed them out the door. ‘Time to go, ladies. Show’s over. Have a nice weekend.’

She shut the door behind them, flipped the sign to closed and let out what sounded like a sigh of relief. ‘Local gossips,’ she explained, turning back to him. ‘You’ll be the talk of the town before nightfall.’

Logan grimaced. ‘Sorry.’

She shrugged and shot him a smile that hit him right in the solar plexus. ‘Everyone needs a little excitement in their lives.’

He got the feeling she wasn’t simply referring to the old biddies. ‘Can I help you with anything? I’m a pro at washing dishes and it seems that I’ve got a bit of time to kill.’

‘It’s fine.’ She shook her head, her smile vanishing as quickly as it had arrived. ‘I haven’t got much to do anyway.’ And suddenly she was all business again. ‘Well, it was nice meeting you. Hope you enjoy your evening with Simone.’

With that, she went back to her task and it was clear he’d been dismissed.

Damn shame, because he was enjoying her company immensely. They’d barely exchanged a few words but the taste of her lips and her no-nonsense attitude had piqued his interest. He only hoped her sister was half as fascinating.

He stood. ‘Well, I might see you round. Have a great weekend.’

‘Thanks. You too.’ But she barely looked up at him as she spoke.

Feeling odd about leaving a café without so much as a cup of coffee, Logan crossed to the door and let himself out. He stepped onto the main street of Bunyip Bay, wide and near deserted like most country towns at this time on a Friday afternoon. He squinted a few hundred metres up the street to where

dusty utes and dirty four-wheel drives were starting to fill the car spaces outside the front of the pub.

Leaving his own ute parked outside the café, he started the short distance towards The Palace. As a journalist, one of his favourite pastimes was people-watching, and small-town pubs were about the best places in the world for such a thing. He'd grab a beer, find a quiet spot in the corner and sit back and watch while he waited for his date.



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