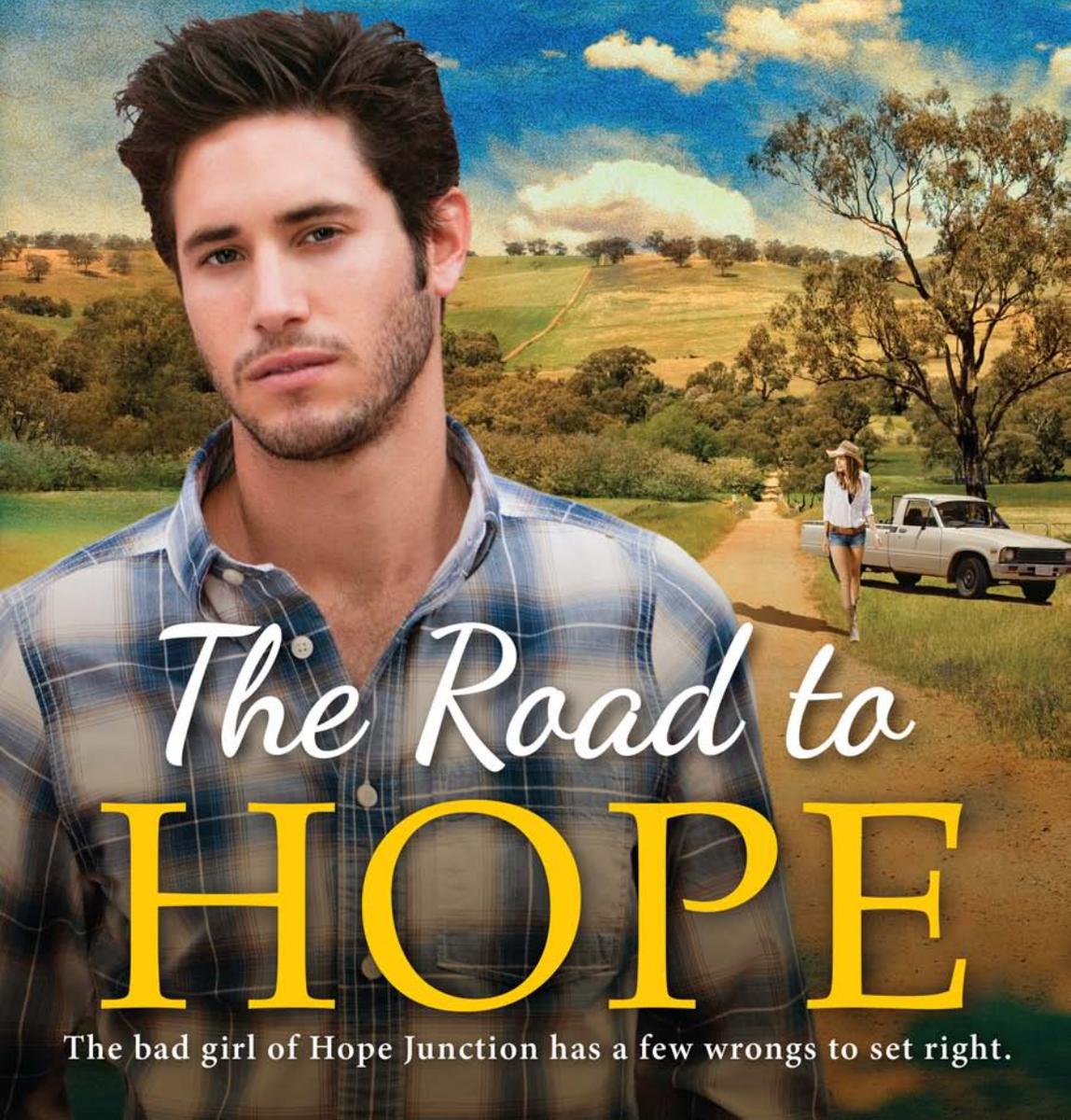


INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

RACHAEL JOHNS



The Road to **HOPE**

The bad girl of Hope Junction has a few wrongs to set right.

The Road to
HOPE

**RACHAEL
JOHNS**

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Chapter One

Sitting on a painfully hard church pew witnessing the man you've always loved declare his undying love and affection to someone else is a special kind of torture. It rams home all kinds of truths. *You aren't good enough, beautiful enough, smart enough, funny enough...* *You simply aren't enough.* As Lauren Simpson watched the Uniting Church minister pronounce local golden boy Flynn Quartermaine and national soap opera princess Ellie Hughes to be husband and wife, she began plotting her escape.

Not just from this stinking hot church—although getting out of here would be a blessing in itself—but also from this town. Hope Junction was the only place she'd ever called home but also the place she'd somehow gotten herself a not so pretty reputation. And it was suddenly blindingly obvious that if she wanted any chance of finding her own Prince Charming and living happily ever after, she needed out. The thought filled her with more dread than excitement, but sometimes in life you had to step out of your comfort zone to move forward, and Lauren decided there and then that's what she would do. It was time to leave Hope Junction behind and explore further pastures, to

go someplace where nobody had preconceived ideas about who she was.

‘It is with great pleasure I present to you mister and missus Flynn Quartermaine!’

The minister beamed out at the congregation as a freshly kissed Ellie turned to face the guests, all of whom appeared to have forgotten (or at least forgiven) what had happened ten years ago. Her illegally good-looking new husband also turned, pulling his wife into his side and offering her the kind of smile that could set whole countries alight. Lauren couldn’t deny the barbed wire of jealousy that wrapped around her heart—just looking at the happy couple made her feel physically ill. She placed her hand against her belly, hoping to quell the nausea.

Most people in her predicament would have boycotted such an affair, but that just wasn’t done in a place the size of Hope Junction. The hospital manager had organised agency nurses to work this weekend, so the local staff could attend and enjoy the most important wedding the town had ever seen. There were even journalists and camera crews here for crying out loud. Lauren would have looked bitter and twisted if she’d insisted on working instead of attending. And just because she *was* bitter and twisted didn’t mean she wanted everyone to know.

Straightening in her pew and flapping the wedding program like a fan near her face, she glanced sideways at her best friend Whitney and attempted a carefree smile. Whitney returned the smile and then turned back to gaze at the front of the church where her husband, Jordan O’Donnell (better known as Rats), was Flynn’s best man. Beside the bride stood Flynn’s teenage sister, Lucy, pretty as a picture in a magenta bodice and black-skirted bridesmaid dress. Very glamorous, very modern, Lauren had to admit, though she wouldn’t have chosen black for the bridesmaids at her own wedding.

Pah! a voice inside her head mocked her. *What wedding? You'll have to find a man who wants to marry you first.*

As Lauren ordered that voice to shut the hell up, Flynn's family rushed forward to offer their hugs, kisses and congratulations to the newlyweds. Ellie didn't have any family of her own, but Joyce from the caravan park was doing a good job playing the part of surrogate mum. Joyce kissed her now and the two of them danced some kind of celebratory jig. They'd grown close during Ellie's godmother Matilda's battle with cancer, which had brought her back to town a decade after she'd left Flynn at the altar. When Joyce stepped back, Flynn's mum Karina pulled Ellie into an embrace and held her tightly. Lauren couldn't hear the words whispered between them but emotion clogged her throat at the visuals. They looked close. Lauren liked Karina a lot, and imagined she'd have made a great mother-in-law. It just didn't seem fair that all the heartache Ellie had caused the Quartermaines was now forgotten and she'd been welcomed into the family with open arms.

She looked away from the front, needing a moment, and saw Whitney lift a tissue to wipe her eye. Lauren felt like crying too but for entirely different reasons. Whitney and Rats were recently married and trying for a baby, Flynn was now off the shelf and shackled to Ellie... When was it going to be her turn?

It wasn't like she was asking for the world. She didn't want millions or eternal youth, she just wanted love. She wanted a man whom she adored to stand at the front of a church and look at her like Flynn was looking at Ellie. She wanted someone to come home to after a long shift at the hospital. Maybe they'd get a dog, have a couple of kids, read the Sunday paper over a late breakfast while their adorable offspring watched cartoons.

'Here, want one of these?'

Whitney's whispered question broke Lauren's daydream. Her friend held out a small packet of Kleenex. Her eyes were wide and full of concern.

Lauren swallowed as she felt a hot tear trickle down her cheek. She plucked a tissue from the proffered packet. 'Thanks,' she managed through a forced smile. 'I always bawl at weddings.'

Whitney grinned. 'I know. You were a blubbing mess at mine, but are you sure that's all this is?' She placed a hand on Lauren's knee and gazed into her eyes in that questioning way of a true friend. 'I know you liked Flynn.'

Liked? She'd loved him since she was twelve years old and he'd rescued her from a snake in the school playground. They'd been friends too—Rats, Whitney, she and Flynn, the Awesome Four-some—until Ellie had come to school in year eleven and ruined everything. He'd barely even glanced at another woman since. She'd tried to get over him—dammit, she'd tried. Moving away to study had offered a pool of dating potential but nothing serious had ever come of it. Since returning to work in Hope Junction she'd been out with a few local farmers and dated a number of medical professionals during their short stints in town, and even had a brief thing with a teacher, but it was like she had a use-by date stamped upon her forehead.

She was incapable of keeping a man longer than three months.

Maybe it was her fault, maybe it had something to do with Flynn—a secret hope that he'd suddenly wake up and notice her. A few months ago it looked like he actually had. They'd dated a couple of times. But all chances of that happening again were over now he had a wedding band on his finger. She might be a lot of things, but a marriage wrecker she was not. No way. She'd allow herself a few tears over an unrequited love lost and then she'd change. No more throwing herself at every good-looking guy who flirted with her. She'd get to know men before going

out with them and she definitely wouldn't sleep with anyone until they'd been dating for over three months.

These were her new rules to live by.

'Lauren?' Whitney's pressure on her knee deepened. 'Are you sure you're okay?'

She blinked, shook her head slightly, sniffed, wiped her nose and then nodded. 'Yeah. I'm fine. Oh look, they're coming towards us.'

Sure enough, Mr and Mrs Flynn Quartermaine were making their way down the aisle, pausing every few steps to thank their guests for coming. There'd been rumours they were going to have the wedding in Bali—that would have been so much easier to get out of—but the town had been up in arms at the thought, so Flynn and Ellie had relented.

Lauren psyched herself up to smile and air-kiss the bride and groom. She hoped she could trust herself not to haul Flynn into her arms and plant one huge smoocheroo upon his lips. Her fingers shook in rhythm with her heart as they approached. If only she was an actress like Ellie she might have had some hope of getting away with the façade but the closer they got the less likely that seemed. Her heart literally ached.

They were at the pew in front of her—Lauren racking her brain for something nice to say to them—when someone gasped and a commotion broke out at the front near the altar. Flynn and Ellie turned as one to see what all the noise was about. They parted slightly and through the gap between them, Lauren saw Karina Quartermaine drop to her knees. Her usually spritely, eighty-something mother-in-law lay sprawled on the church floor.

Instinct kicked in. Lauren shoved past Whitney and charged up the aisle after Ellie and Flynn, who were now heading for his grandmother.

'Please, Lauren, help her,' Karina pleaded, looking up as Lauren approached.

Lauren offered her a reassuring smile and then sank to the floor to examine the patient. Hilda Quartermaine's lips were peeling and her usually peachy-coloured skin looked dull and dry; textbook signs of dehydration. It was a sweltering late November day and the temperature inside the country church was hot enough to pop corn. Although dehydration could be serious in the elderly, it was easily treated.

Grabbing an embroidered cushion from the nearest pew, Lauren lifted the old woman's head slightly and slipped it beneath her thin grey hair. 'Can someone get some water?' she asked, her gaze not leaving her patient as she placed her hand on her shoulder and shook gently. 'Mrs Quartermaine, can you hear me?'

'Should we call an ambulance?' a voice behind her asked.

She started to answer that yes, that wouldn't hurt, but the words died on her tongue as the old lady's eyes opened slowly. She looked up into Lauren's face and then blinked as if disorientated. Lauren let out the breath she'd been holding. She loved old people. Many of her favourite patients lived in the nursing wing of the hospital, and she hated seeing them confused or distressed.

'It's okay, Mrs Quartermaine. You're in the church for Flynn and Ellie's wedding,' she said, squeezing the older woman's hand gently. 'I think you must have fainted with the heat.'

'Fainted?' The words came out on a disbelieving whisper. Hilda Quartermaine was a stocky farmer's widow who had witnessed years of drought and other rural hardships in her long life. She was still very active in the Country Women's Association and the idea she could have blacked out over a little heat obviously appalled her. She yanked her hand from Lauren's and palmed them both against the hard floor. 'I need to get up.'

Lauren smiled. The feistiness was a good sign. 'Yes, of course, but let's take it slowly, okay?'

‘I’ll help.’

Lauren looked sideways to find Flynn crouching beside her. She was sandwiched between him and his mother but had barely noticed, her attention focused on her patient. ‘Yes, that would be great,’ she replied, then looked back to his grandmother. ‘Flynn and I are going to help you into a sitting position and then I need you to have a little water before we get you back onto the chair.’

Mrs Quartermaine opened her mouth as if to object to the assistance, but her daughter-in-law Karina interceded. ‘Mum, do as you’re told for once. The sooner we get you sorted, the sooner we can get on with the day.’

Lucy appeared with a large glass of water and hovered above them. ‘Is Granny going to be okay?’

Karina stood and took the glass from her daughter. ‘I think so.’

‘She’s going to be fine, if she lets us look after her,’ Lauren said, offering her patient a reprimanding smile. ‘Are you going to do that, Mrs Quartermaine?’

Pouting, Flynn’s grandma sighed and nodded. With everyone a little more relaxed now, Flynn and Lauren positioned themselves on either side of her and carefully eased her up. Flynn then stood behind his grandmother and she leaned back against him as she allowed her daughter-in-law to hold the glass for her as she drank. Lauren took the old woman’s hand again. Taking a pulse was second nature to her. The heartbeat was rapid, which matched her diagnosis of dehydration.

Likely a rest and a few good glasses of water would do the trick but due to her patient’s age, Lauren didn’t want to take chances of there being another underlying cause to her collapse. ‘I’m really sorry,’ she said, glancing at the faces surrounding her, ‘but we’re going to have to take Mrs Quartermaine to the hospital and get Dr Bates to check her over.’

‘No!’ The old woman glared at Lauren. ‘Thank you for your help but I’m fine, really. I just forgot to drink enough in all the excitement of the morning, but—’

‘No buts, Gran.’ Flynn lifted her hand to his lips and placed a kiss on her paper-thin skin. Lauren’s heart turned over in her chest at the softness of his gesture, at the love he had for the older woman. ‘There’s a few hours till the reception,’ he continued. ‘We’ll come with you.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ tsked Mrs Quartermaine. ‘What about the photos?’

‘I’m sure Dr Bates will make you a priority but if things look to be running late, we’ll just have the photos in the hospital, won’t we, Els?’

Els! Lauren’s heart cramped at Flynn’s pet name for Ellie. It couldn’t have sounded more adoring if he’d called her sweetheart or darling.

Ellie blushed like the besotted bride she was, leaned past Flynn and kissed her new grandmother-in-law on the cheek. ‘Fine with me. In fact there are some rather nice roses in the hospital courtyard.’

And the truth of the matter was that Flynn and Ellie were so damn good-looking that their wedding photos would sparkle even if they took them at the local rubbish dump. Lauren felt her long red fingernails digging into her palms and forced herself to unclench her hands.

‘Humph.’ Karina was still holding out the glass for her, but Mrs Quartermaine pushed it away and folded her arms. ‘I can see no one’s going to listen to me in all this. So let’s just go and get it over with.’

‘I’ll get the car.’ Karina gave the glass to Lucy and hurried down the aisle.

Lauren was about to ask Flynn to help her assist his grandmother up, but he got there before her. Stooping again, he slipped

one hand around her back and the other beneath her legs and then lifted her into his arms as if she weighed no more than a pillow. Much the same way a groom lifted a bride to carry her over the threshold. Would he do that to Ellie? The thought sparked a new rush of jealousy and ache in Lauren's heart. Disgusted at herself, she tried to push it aside. Not only was now not the time to be thinking such pathetic thoughts, but only minutes ago she'd resolved to move on. Surely there were other marriageable men on the planet.

Only slightly mollified by that thought—because let's face it, she hadn't managed to find one yet—she hurried after Flynn with Lucy and Ellie at her heels. Someone had already ushered most of the guests outside, so there was a clear run to Karina's waiting car. Concerned locals looked on, calling out offers of support and best wishes as Flynn settled the old woman in the front seat of the four-wheel drive.

'We'll meet you at the hospital,' he told his mum as he leaned on the open passenger door before stepping back and closing it. Lauren watched as Lucy climbed into the back seat, tossing her bouquet beside her.

Ellie stepped forward to take Flynn's hand. 'She'll be okay,' she said as the newlyweds exchanged a grave look and Karina drove off.

'I know.' Flynn grinned back. 'She's a tough old bird.'

Starting to turn away, Lauren decided she'd call Dr Bates to fill her in and then make a quick getaway, conveniently forgetting to return to the reception that night. No one would miss her and besides, watching these two comfort each other was about as appealing as giving herself acupuncture in the eye. With a rusty nail. She didn't fancy tagging along to the hospital even if she had more right to be there than anyone.

'Hey, Lauren.'

Flynn's call jolted her, but she took a deep breath before turning back to face them.

'Yes?' She forced a smile, knowing it would be a long while before she banished the image of Ellie in a wedding dress from her mind. All that tanned shimmery skin and white taffeta. *Ugh.*

As one, Flynn and Ellie stepped forward, closing the gap between them again. 'Are you coming to the hospital?' Flynn offered a warm smile—sweet but totally different from the one he kept solely for Ellie. It almost felt patronising. He was so sexy and kind that she felt like punching him in the nose, which wasn't at all fair. She was the one with the problem here. It wasn't Flynn's fault her damn stupid heart couldn't let him go.

She swallowed. 'Of course. I want to be sure your grandmother listens to the doc's instructions.'

Flynn chuckled. 'Good plan. Do you need a lift?'

No way did she want to play third wheel in the flash car Flynn had hired especially for the wedding and their honeymoon. Rumour had it they were driving to Eagle Bay and staying in some luxury resort for the week. How Flynn could justify getting away during harvest was beyond her, but—

'Lauren?' Flynn spoke again, a slight crease forming between his thick eyebrows as he waited for her answer. Like a knife twisting in her heart, his new gold wedding band glinted in the sunlight.

'It's fine.' She waved a hand towards the car park, averting her gaze from the reminder her love was married. 'I'll drive myself. See you there.'

Then she practically fled towards her little hatchback. Without looking back, she unlocked the car and slumped into the driver's seat, slamming the door behind her. She needed a moment to collect her thoughts and disappointments, but Hilda Quartermaine's collapse had stolen such luxuries. If only it had been someone

other than Flynn's grandmother. It would have given her the perfect excuse to get away. But when had anything gone in Lauren's favour recently?

Putting her phone on speaker, she dialled the hospital as she drove, alerting the agency nurses of their incoming patient. She then called Dr Bates to ask if she could meet her there.

'I'm already here.' Hannah sounded as if she were smiling. 'Dr Lewis, our locum, just arrived, so I'm showing him around. I'll see you in a moment.'

Lauren disconnected the call and took a deep breath. She'd forgotten Hannah was leaving tomorrow for two months travelling Europe and America and she didn't want to meet the new doctor in a tizz. Not that it mattered—come Monday morning her resignation would be tendered. Two weeks later, she'd be gone.

Slightly lighter of heart at that thought, she arrived at the hospital, parked and rushed from the car, hoping to be inside before Ellie and Flynn arrived. The doors to Hope Junction's small emergency department were open and the agency nurses were helping Karina get Mrs Quartermaine out of the car. Lauren rushed over to help them assist their patient into the waiting wheelchair.

'I don't need this,' grumbled Flynn's grandmother, shooting angry glares at all concerned. 'I'm perfectly capable of walking in myself. In fact, I don't even need to be here. You're all wasting precious time and resources on this very important day.'

'Mum. Just stop and let them look after you.' Karina placed a hand on her mother-in-law's shoulder and apologised with her eyes to the women trying to help. Lucy stood next to her looking lost and anxious.

Lauren introduced herself to the agency nurses and offered her assistance. They were happy to let her handle the disgruntled patient and she was more than willing to do so, wanting to be busy when Flynn and Ellie arrived.

‘I’ll go tell Dr Bates you’re here,’ said the shorter of the two nurses, before turning and hurrying inside. The other nurse hung back, allowing Lauren to take control.

Standing behind and taking hold of the wheelchair’s handles, Lauren bent down and whispered in Mrs Quartermaine’s ear. ‘Humouring us will get this over and done with quicker.’

An infuriated sigh wafted up from the wheelchair and Lauren smiled a little victory. Flynn and Ellie were just coming up behind as she pushed the chair into the treatment room.

‘Dr Bates,’ Mrs Quartermaine cried as Hannah entered from the main corridor. ‘I hope you’ll see sense. Everyone else seems to think I need mollycoddling but I feel fine. And I have a wedding reception to get to. Been a long while since I kicked up my heels and danced.’

Chuckling, Hannah Bates—a forty-something woman with plain brown hair that usually hung down her back in a long plait and a no-nonsense attitude to match—crossed the room to greet her patient. ‘Hello Mrs Quartermaine. I understand you’re eager to get back to the celebrations and I promise I’ll do my best to make that possible. But it would be remiss of any of us—’ she gestured to everyone else in the room ‘—to let you go without giving you a proper examination. Lauren says you fainted?’

Mrs Quartermaine snorted and gave Lauren her devil glare. A shadow fell over her before she could respond. Assuming it was Flynn, Lauren turned, preparing to usher him and Ellie out of the room during the examination, but the words died on her tongue.

Standing behind her was a tall, dark, broad-shouldered and extraordinarily handsome stranger. Next to him even Flynn looked quite ordinary. The man’s twinkling brown eyes and the sexy stubble that adorned his perfect jawline gave him the aura of a movie star. Was he an actor friend of Ellie’s come west for the wedding? If so, how had she not noticed him in the church?

Not that he looked dressed for a wedding. His attire was decidedly more casual than all the other guests. This thought faded into insignificance as his hands came down on her shoulders. She shivered at his touch and her insides turned to liquid as their eyes met. He smiled and shifted her sideways a little.

‘Anything I can do to help, Doctor?’

Lauren frowned as the movie star stepped past her, halting just before the wheelchair.

Hannah nodded. ‘Sure, that would be great.’ She glanced down at her patient. ‘Mrs Quartermaine, I’d like you to meet Dr Tom Lewis. He’s going to be looking after the town while I’m away, and with his help I’m going to get you back to the wedding as soon as possible.’

The man, apparently not a movie star despite his devastating looks, crouched down in front of the wheelchair, putting himself at eye level with the old woman. He lifted her hand and spoke softly, but Lauren couldn’t make out his words. She was too busy staring at the way his faded jeans stretched over his butt. A deliciously tight butt if the view was anything to go by. His black t-shirt popped out of his pants as he leaned forward and she almost whimpered at the slash of tanned skin suddenly visible to her susceptible eyes. Had a lower back ever looked so magnificent? Certainly not one she’d ever seen—and as a nurse, she’d seen a fair few.

Her libido had a moment and her mouth went dry as she realised this man wasn’t a friend of Ellie’s passing through for the wedding, but instead someone she’d be working with closely while seeing out her notice.

Dr Bates didn’t take many holidays, but the few times she’d done so in recent years, the locum doctors hadn’t been much to write home about. That hadn’t always stopped Lauren getting to know them—she wasn’t *all* about looks despite popular

opinion—but this man was a refreshing change. She craned her neck a little, trying to get a look at his hand to check for a wedding band. From this vantage point, his fingers looked devoid of rings. A smile lifted her lips as the warmth of new possibility spread through her limbs—such a pleasant change from the feeling of utter desolation that had weighed her down in church. Maybe there was hope for her after all.

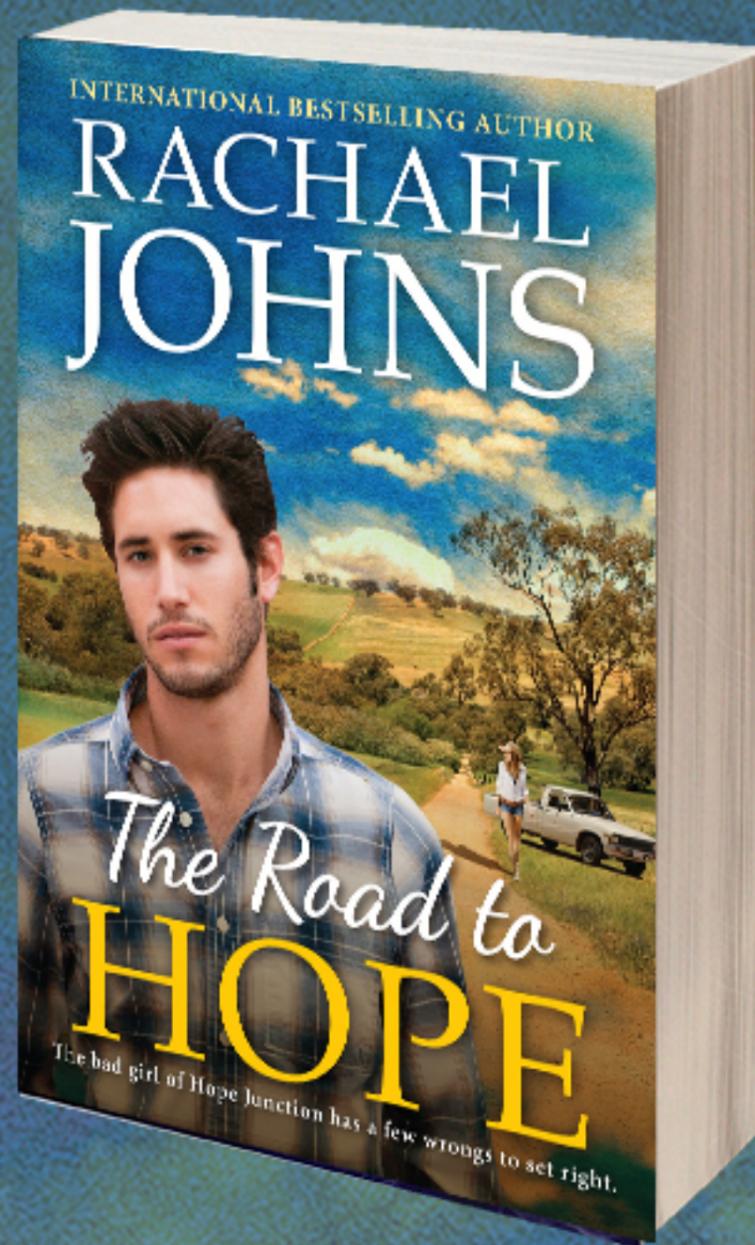
In the middle of a daydream about asking him over for drinks—or even better, dinner—she caught herself.

What are you doing? Her clichéd reaction to a hot new doctor made her decision of less than an hour ago all the more important. Averting her gaze, she cleared her throat and turned back to focus on the Quartermaines.

‘Karina, you can stay if you like, but I need to ask the rest of you to wait in the corridor.’

She ushered Flynn, Ellie and Lucy out into the waiting room, took a quick breath and then stepped back inside the treatment room where she vowed to be the consummate professional. Her days of throwing herself at men—even brown-eyed movie-star-lookalike doctors who were exactly her type—were done and dusted. If she felt even a whisper of lust building in his presence, she would stamp on it like it was a poisonous spider and get on with her day.

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