

Chapter 1

THE GHOST BY THE BILLABONG

5 DECEMBER 1968

Lightning slashed a purple sky. Rain swept closer, in grey flurries across the paddocks, like lacy wind-blown curtains.

Jed stared down the road. No cars. No chance of a lift before the rain hit hard. Just sheep like rocks, and rocks like sheep. And gum trees. Gum trees, gum trees, gum trees, lining a dirt track down to the river. Every gum tree looked the same, and so did every sheep.

Night was already swallowing what was left of the day, darkened further by the storm. Drinkwater homestead was an hour's walk away. She'd planned to arrive there at dusk so the Thompsons would have to ask her to dinner. Then they'd have to invite her to stay the night. Once she'd manoeuvred the old folk into giving her a bed, she'd be halfway there.

The lightning danced across the river. The ground vibrated as thunder ??? it. This was not a storm to be out in. Time for a new plan. The last car had passed half an hour back: a woman with kids in the back, who'd ignored Jed's

outstretched thumb, even though she wore a loose T-shirt to hide The Beasts. The Beasts had got her into enough trouble already. Women's libbers who burned their bras mustn't have breasts that bounced if you ran and gave out the wrong messages entirely. Blokes wolf-whistling every time you passed a building site or pub wasn't the half of it.

Damn The Beasts and damn this storm. Damn her hunger too, that slowed her brain and made each step an effort.

She had to think! Plan! Even if a car did come, drivers didn't pick up hitchhikers in the rain, not and get their nice seats wet.

She glanced around, hoping for a house, even a shed. But there were only those gums on one side, sheep on the other, ignoring her, heads down, backs to the advancing rain.

'All right for you,' she told them. Lucky sheep, in waterproof wool. Jed wished she could live on grass too. Or photosynthesise. Eating was fun. Finding food wasn't.

Hunger bit again, so sharp that the world shimmered. But she had a packet of biscuits in her shoulder bag, kept for an emergency like this. Drinkwater was her last chance. She had to arrive there clear headed.

She looked at the track down to the river. The trees along the river were thicker, but trees provided only an illusion of shelter. Once trees dripped, you got as wet as if you sat out in a paddock. Was she more likely to be hit by lightning out here, or under a tall tree?

A light suddenly flickered down the track. lightning? No, the light was still there. A house!

A house meant shelter. Even if the owners didn't let an unknown girl with a black eye, a shoulder bag and the grime of three days and nights of travelling on her face, hands and

clothes into their home — and who could blame them — she could press herself against a wall, under the eaves. She'd be mostly dry, and more importantly, safe from lightning bolts.

She jogged down the track, ignoring the hunger and the pain in her shoulder. You couldn't ignore being struck by lightning — or maybe you could, because you'd be dead. The thunder rumbled towards her, louder than a semi-trailer. Hail stung her cheek as she reached the clearing.

She stopped, disappointed as bitter as the smell of Merv's stale beer.

No house. Not even a hut. Only a fire in a strange teepee shape, licking at the logs of wood above it. Next to the fire a sheet of canvas slanted between two trees, making both roof and wall. Water: the still mirror of a billabong, speckled with raindrop circles, not the river which must be further down the track. A gnome-like man, grinning at her, all yellow teeth and wrinkles. An almost golden glow on the horizon, as the last sunlight pierced the clouds beyond.

And the smell of sausages.

She'd have run back to the road, where at least someone might see if the man attacked her, if it hadn't been for the sausages.

How long since she had eaten? Didn't know. Didn't want to know, or she might eat the biscuits now, gulping them down, instead of leaving them till the morning so she could meet the Thompsons with a brain clear and hands that didn't tremble ...

The sausages sizzled above the flames. Oh, wow. Big, fatty sausages ...

The gnome nodded at her. 'Better get under the shelter. I won't hurt you, girlie.' The firelight showed gaps in his grin.

Suddenly, and for no reason at all, she liked him, maybe because he looked at her face, and not The Beasts. ‘Can’t hurt you, anyway,’ he added. ‘I’m a ghost.’

Jed took a cautious step forwards as a gust of hail turned her shoulders to ice. ‘Ghosts don’t cook sausages.’

‘No,’ he corrected. ‘Ghosts don’t eat sausages. These are for you.’

Which was just crazy enough for her to stumble forwards, under the canvas, as the first sheet of rain hit, the hail rattling on the canvas like tiny fists.

The man — or ghost — smelled of old campfires and gum leaves, but he had angled the canvas so the rain hit it, not them, and it blocked the wind too. And maybe what she was smelling was the clearing, not him at all ...

No, he wasn’t a ghost. Jed knew what ghosts looked like. But on the other hand, she thought dazedly, maybe there were types of ghosts she hadn’t seen. Even ghosts who cooked sausages.

She hugged her knees and looked at the fire still burning under its canopy of logs, at the sausages, threaded on a long stick, nicely blackened, split in spots and oozing juice.

The ghost held the stick out to her. ‘Careful, they’re hot.’

‘No tomato sauce?’

The ghost’s grin widened. ‘Don’t push your luck, girlie. You want them sausages or not?’

Jed nodded. She pulled one off the stick, ignoring the heat on her fingers, bit into it, felt the lovely juice, tasted the glorious meatiness and forced herself not to gulp it down. Another bite, and another. Her mind steadied, and her hands, as if her body knew that food had arrived, even if it hadn’t processed it yet.

‘You’re not having one?’ she asked, the last bite swallowed.

‘Told you. They’re all for you.’

She ate the next sausage more slowly. By the fourth, and last, her body had relaxed out of the ‘must find food’ urgency that had made her jittery all day.

Darkness sat firmly on the campsite now. Lightning blazed a more-than-daylight flash across the billabong, then was gone. The rain turned solid. Gold light, trees and billabong vanished. The world was only the dryness of the canvas and the heat it reflected from the fire so that both sides of her were warm. Warmth and food ...

She threw the greasy stick onto the blaze. She glanced at the ghost, and found him still grinning at her. His remaining teeth were worn right down, brown at the tops. ‘Gonna poke me with your finger?’

‘Why?’

‘To see if I’m solid.’

Jed shrugged. ‘If you can hold a stick of sausages, you’re solid enough.’

‘Makes sense. I really am a ghost you know. Official. I died and everything.’

A year of surviving on the streets — or better yet, under a bridge or sleeping in a railway waiting room — had taught Jed never to be alone with a man. You weren’t alone hitchhiking in a car or truck, not if there were other cars on the road if you were prepared to rip the upholstery or break the windscreen with the fruit knife she always carried with her — you could do many, many things with a fruit knife — if the driver tried to take you down a side road or refused to stop. But for some reason she felt no fear now. ‘When did you die?’

‘Up in New Guinea in 1942.’

World War II, she thought. ‘Why are you here then? Did you live around here?’ Perhaps the ruins of his hut were nearby. If he were a ghost, which she still doubted — though nor did she think he was lying, precisely.

‘Never lived anywhere for long, except in an orphanage in Melbourne when I was small. Wouldn’t go back to that place for quids. I reckon when you die you come back to what you loved.’

‘You loved this billabong?’ The rain curtain shifted, leaving drops as light as cobwebs on the edge of the tarpaulin. Suddenly the firelight and the rags of dusk showed beauty: white trunks of trees, like ghosts themselves, the billabong a mirror of flames and leaves, a bank of sand and debris separating it from the long elbow of the river. She blinked, shocked by the explosion of senses. When had she last noticed beauty?

‘Never seen this place before in my life,’ the ghost said cheerfully. ‘It’s people I loved, not a place. In my death now — I got to know this place pretty well after me death. This place is useful. Ghosts turning up tend to scare people. It’s Better people don’t know that you watch them.’

Jed shivered. ‘You spy on them?’ There was too much in her life that was bearable only because no one had witnessed it.

‘Nothing anyone wouldn’t like,’ the ghost assured her. ‘Just enough for me to know they’re going all right. Enough watching to ...’ He smiled. It was a good smile. ‘Enough to keep a ghost’s feet on the ground.’

‘Who are *they*?’

‘That would be telling.’

‘Well, yes.’

‘Fair enough. I keep an eye on my sister, now and then. And her kids. Never met the kids, but it’s good to see them scooting happy about the place. Mah and I had little enough happiness when we were small.’ The ghost stared out across the billabong. ‘And someone else.’

‘The girl you loved?’

The wrinkled eyes looked back at her, amused. ‘This ain’t a bloomin’ romance comic, you know.’

‘Bet it is a girl.’

‘Ghosts can’t pay you if they lose a bet.’

Which might be true. But the ghost’s sausages still lay warm and comforting in her stomach. ‘Do you watch the girl you loved?’

‘Yeah,’ he said slowly. ‘I watch her, now and then. Only girl there ever was for me, but then I never stayed around in one place long enough to know another.’

‘What was her name?’

‘Belle Magnifico, the mermaid of the South Seas.’ The ghost grinned at Jed’s expression. ‘That’s true as my name’s Fred. Belle had a mermaid tail and everything. We was in a circus together, her and me and Mah. And I don’t know why I’m telling you this. Or feedin’ you sausages neither.’

‘Maybe I remind you of Belle the mermaid.’

‘Nah. Belle could make the audience stop breathing. No one would notice you.’

That hurt, even more because for some reason she thought this small man ... ghost ... told the truth. ‘Thanks.’

‘Did I say you aren’t beautiful? Belle’s hair was falling out. She had to wear a wig. Scars on her neck and arms. But she shone like she had swallowed a star. Still does. You ...’ He

winked. ‘You’re like me. You’ve worked hard so no one ever notices you. Do that long enough, and you start fading from the world. Grey ghosts, that’s you and me.’

‘I’m not a ghost.’ Or maybe I am, she thought. Maybe I did die a year ago. It had been a year since anyone had even touched her skin. That truckie had tried to put his hand on her knee, but she had shifted her bag so his hand landed on it instead. And she’d got the black eye from a block of wood, not the hand that held it.

‘No, you’re not a ghost, love. Not quite yet, anyhow.’ The words were strangely reassuring. Weirdest of all was the feeling that she wanted to sleep. Could sleep, safe and deeply, as she hadn’t slept in years. How long since she had slept through a whole night? Sleeping was dangerous, except in railway waiting rooms, but stationmasters soon caught on if you tried sleeping there two nights in a row. Catnaps in daylight were safer, under a tree in a park. To sleep a whole night ...

Lightning flickered then vanished, as if a bulb was going out. The thunderclap was worse — some great hand ripped the air. Even the trees shook.

‘The storm’s passing to the south,’ the ghost remarked.

‘No, it’s not. It’s here!’

The ghost — Fred? — shook his head. ‘We’re not getting the worst of it. No lightning strikes here. Nor at Drinkwater neither.’

‘You know Drinkwater?’

‘Hard to miss a place as big as that. Reckon there’s whole countries that aren’t as big as Drinkwater.’ He looked out at the rain, coming down perfectly straight now, like icy spears. ‘This’ll stop soon. Wouldn’t want to be here in a proper

dumping.’

This wasn’t proper rain? ‘Why not?’

He nodded at the billabong. ‘That used to be a section of the river, till some flood broke the river’s banks. When the flood went down this bit was left stranded. If a big flood washed down the river now, you and me’d be under five feet of water. If we hadn’t the sense to move. Which we have,’ he added. ‘So don’t worry, girlie.’

‘How fast does the water come when it floods?’

‘Fast as a car, sometimes, a wall of logs and muck. But we won’t get that tonight. Smell that? Hot dirt after rain. Best smell there is. Except maybe for sausages. What’s your name?’ the ghost added.

‘Jed.’ The new name came easily now. ‘Jed Kelly.’

A twitch of the lips. ‘Good name.’

‘That’s why I chose it.’

‘Rob from the rich and give to the poor? I did a bit of that too. The poor being me, of course. I’m Fred. But I told you that, didn’t I? Had a few names, in my time. Fred was my name when I died, at any rate. And for the best bit of my life. What are you doing out this way? Going to put on a tin helmet and rob a bank like old Ned?’

“‘I’m eating sausages.’ There was no way Jed was going to tell him about the Thompsons.

‘You can’t con a con artist darling, You’re planning something. The only people who use this road are going to Overflow or Sampsons’ or Drinkwater, and they go by car or truck or horse. Except for me, of course.’

‘Do con artists tell each other what their plans are?’

‘Only if they need a bit of help carrying them out.’ The ghost grinned at her encouragingly.

‘I don’t.’

‘Fair enough, then. How’d you get the black eye?’

No reason not to tell him, that, at least. ‘An old bloke bashed me with a branch when I was asleep in a park in Melbourne. Got away from him okay.’ And left him crying on the ground too. A poor drunk skeleton of a man. She wouldn’t have lashed out with her heavy shoulder bag so viciously if she hadn’t been taken by surprise.

‘So your home’s in Melbourne?’

‘Don’t have a home, and when I did, it wasn’t in Melbourne.’

‘Why’ve you come here?’

She shrugged. ‘It’s where the truck was going.’ Which was true: not the whole truth, of course. But not a lie. Never a lie. Jed Kelly was guilty of many things. But not of lying.

‘And that’s the only answer I’m going to get, eh? But hitchhiking’s dangerous for girls. You hear about those poor dead lassies down in Victoria? All they found of them were their bodies.’

She shivered at the thought of dead girls’ heads, hidden somewhere by a madman. ‘I can keep myself safe.’

‘Can you now?’

She nodded, thinking of the men who had tried to take advantage of her. She’d had to learn tricks to survive the last year. But she *had* learned them.

‘So you just go where the road takes you? I know the feeling. But what *set* you travelling, eh?’

Memories seized her. Pain and guilt and secrets.

She wanted to run. Needed to run, even out into the rain, run till a car picked her up, took her somewhere, anywhere, away from the past, to new scenes blotting out horrors that

swallowed her until she wasn't there, didn't want to be, not there or anywhere ...

'Hey, girlie, look at me!'

She glanced at him; she was panting, her hands trembling again. His wrinkles had tightened in concern. 'You're back in your past, ain't you when bad things happened?'

She managed a nod.

'Well, you come back from there. I'm an old man. It's okay for me to be a ghost. But you're too young. You understand?'

'No.'

'You listen. I learned this the hard way and you're getting it for free. Bad things happened to you? Stuff that hurts?'

Jed nodded, still fighting to keep the memories away.

'Right, this is how to shove 'em away. Think of now, not then. What can you smell?'

'Sausages.'

'Yeah, but old Fred won't always be around with sausages to help you. What else can you smell?'

You, she thought. Sweat and gum leaves. But he was kind so she couldn't say that and, anyway, it was a fresh sweat smell. He must wash in the river. 'Nothing.'

'Wrong answer.'

'But there isn't ... I can't ...' Jed stopped. The breath rolled through her nostrils, clean and cold. And yes, there were scents here. Good ones. 'Wet soil,' she said slowly. 'Hot soil that's wet now. Cold air. And the billabong. It's, um, fishier than the smell of the river.'

'Ah, now you're getting it. What can you hear?'

A million drops, slowed by the trees and falling to the soil. Something too low to hear properly, like the earth exhaling after the day and letting night-time in. All at once the fire-lit

gum trees weren't the same. Some carried their branches like arms reaching to the clouds. Others drooped like diamond-splattered umbrellas.

She smiled.

The ghost smiled in return. 'Good girl. You're back here again. When the bad things bite, remember you're here now. Think of what you can smell, what you can hear. Think you can do it again?'

'I ... I think so.'

'Takes practice. You've got a life ahead of you, girl.'

Colour faded a little from the world. A life ahead of her? Maybe, if her plan worked and she could convince the old folks at Drinkwater. Because if she couldn't, this might be as far as the road could take her. As far as her strength could manage ...

The ghost stared at her, intent. 'You need to make the most of being alive while you can, girlie. Still not going to tell me what you're doing so far off the beaten track?'

'No.' She waited for him to insist, even to turn mean.

He didn't.

'Fair enough,' he said mildly. 'Time for shut-eye, Jed Kelly. I'll stoke up the fire in a while. No need for a blanket tonight.'

She didn't have a blanket. Carrying a blanket made you look homeless, which meant shopkeepers looked at you suspiciously and café owners wouldn't give you a few days' work as a dish washer either. Easier to find a newspaper in a bin and line her clothes with it to keep warm at night. But there were no rubbish bins out there.

She touched the outline of the book in her shoulder bag. It felt wrong to go to sleep without reading first — she usually needed at least a short visit to a world between the covers

where things made sense and endings were tidy and were people happy. But torches were too bulky to shoplift, and candles flickered unless you were in a draught-proof room. She could probably make out the words by firelight, but it would seem unfriendly to read with the man ... or ghost ... beside her. He hadn't even glanced at The Beasts all the time she had been there.

She settled her bag at the far end of the shelter and placed her head on it. Her feet poked out beyond the canvas, but the rain had stopped and the fire glowed. And she had a ghost to guard her sleep. She shut her eyes and felt the fire's heat cover her like a quilt.

'I'd sing you a lullaby, if I knew one, but the songs I know got words you don't sing to a young lady.'

Where did he think she'd grown up? A sweet little house with a sweet little mum and no bad world past the front door? I bet I know every word you do and more, she thought. And slept.