

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE WATTLE SEED INN*

LÉONIE KELSALL

The River Gum Cottage

*Just the right amount of romance,
community and intrigue.'*

RACHAEL JOHNS
bestselling author of *Outback Secrets*



1

Lucie

Sometimes, she wished him dead.

It usually only happened in those hazy, sleep-drugged moments between dragging herself from her dreams and the start of her day, though. Once she was awake, her emotions were generally more rational.

But awake or asleep, there was no arguing that if he was dead, she would hurt less.

Lucie squeezed the crystal pendant strung on a leather thong around her neck. The quartz—for destroying negative energy while storing positive intentions—would need cleansing next full moon: it got a pretty hard workout whenever she thought of her father.

She eased out of the back door of the two-storey townhouse, letting it close quietly behind her so as not to wake the sleeping household. The tiny courtyard was bathed in

a peachy ruddiness she told herself was sunrise, though she knew it was more an ambient glow from the Melbourne city lights.

As the ivy swallowing the garage rustled, she flinched, then hissed, ‘Scat, cat.’ Her neighbour defended, with a wooden spoon, a lot of gesticulating and what were very probably Italian curses, the black tom’s right to roam the entire suburb, so Lucie kept the four-year war strictly between her and the cat.

The tom shot straight up the smooth bark of the magnolia and sat on a naked branch, glaring balefully down, his tail swishing.

‘Don’t jump onto the road, stupid,’ Lucie muttered, moving away so the cat wouldn’t dash onto the street. She drifted her hand across the potted lavender to release the early morning scent. Nearby, the fruit on the mandarin tree glowed like Chinese lanterns, so small that, with a bit of a stretch, she could fit three in one hand. Which meant the tree would yield only six handfuls of citrus-flavoured nostalgia, Lucie decided with a quick count. She couldn’t expect a three-year-old potted tree to do much better, even though she moved it around the courtyard with the rickety trolley purchased online, finding shelter from the worst of the frosts. Not that Melbourne frosts were anything compared to those back home on the farm nestled in the Adelaide Hills. There, the birdbath tucked beneath the skeletal winter fingers of the cherry tree alongside Dad’s favourite mandarin regularly froze over until after midday.

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Lucie hesitated. Would visiting this memory be a pathway to old hurts? Tentatively, she allowed the images to trickle in: her breath steaming the air through mitten-wrapped hands as Mum lifted her up to check whether the slivers of pale, buttercream sun threading through the branches had melted the ice in the stone bowl, releasing the flowers and fruit they had arranged in it the night before.

The reminiscence was sweet, safe. Yet, like pressing on a bruise, she couldn't control the urge to push further, to rummage around in memory until she made herself hurt. She found a wound instantly: her feet sliding back and forth in wellington boots and her hand in his, skipping beside Dad as he strode across the dirt yard surrounding the neat double-brick house. Beyond the corrugated iron sheds, row upon row of identical mounds stretched across hectares of paddock. As they reached the nearest furrow, Dad thrust strong fingers into the dark loam, checking whether the soil was warm enough to nurture his precious strawberry seedlings. Then, his work-roughened hands cupped around hers, they would bed a tiny, three-leaved plant in the mound of crumbly earth, chanting a silly rhyme Dad had made up.

Snug tight little plant.

God the rain and light will grant.

Sun will shine, you'll grow fine,

And one day you'll be mine.

Tucking the plant in a nest of hay, they moved thirty centimetres along the row that stretched up a rolling hill to a

horizon hazed with the shadowy giants of silver gums. Dad's hands guiding her, they eased the next plant into place. Sang the song. Then onto the next. And the next. Countless hours spent together in the ice-tipped sunshine, working the rows until an entire field of small, lime-coloured leaves waved in the chill breeze.

The memory itself didn't hurt: the pain lay in the contrast to the betrayal that came later. Though they had grown apart, Lucie had never expected her father to turn his back on her.

She dug a thumb into one of the tiny mandarins, then smoothly shucked the fruit. She crushed the fragrant, dimpled peel and inhaled deeply. The tangy scent wasn't the only reason for the film of tears that blurred her view of the courtyard: even after more than four years, homesickness snuck up on her sometimes. Rural South Australia and suburban Melbourne had few similarities, but shared fragrances often evoked her unwanted memories.

The crescent moon of fruit puckered her lips as it exploded in her mouth. She grimaced, swallowed the excess saliva, and then squashed another segment against her teeth. There was a perverse pleasure to be found in mixing the sour juice with the false sweetness of her childhood memories.

She tossed the peel into the terracotta pots of oregano, basil and chocolate mint—which never tasted any different to regular mint, but she lived in hope—near the back door. The smell of citrus was supposed to keep the cat from spraying the herbs. Feline pee wasn't the kind of organic she

coveted, and it would be nice to use her produce without imagining a hint of ammonia in everything she plated.

An egg-shaped patio chair swung from a bracket on the wall, the wicker spangled with dew crystals suspended on delicate webs. She edged onto the seat, careful not to destroy the spider's work. From here her tiny garden seemed a little larger, her boundaries less constrained. The watery sun peeking between the magnolia branches held a promise of the summer still months distant, although Melbourne never seemed to match the unrelenting dry heat of Adelaide. At Blue Flag Strawberries, in the hills to the east of the city, spring sunshine would herald an early ripening of the berries, along with the anticipation of an extended cropping season.

Lucie gave a sharp grunt, annoyed with herself for letting her mind wander there again. Even after all these years, she related every quirk of the weather to what would be happening on the farm. She piled the three mandarins in her lap and reached into the pocket of her dressing-gown. The powder-blue velour hung in a loose flap where the stitching had torn free. She had been using the same robe for more than a decade, addicted to the soft, slightly threadbare reassurance of the well-washed material. A few years back there had even been a stage when she had practically lived in it, adding trackpants and a long-sleeved t-shirt in the depths of winter. The oversized pockets were always stuffed with her life and had, over time, housed everything from uni textbooks and late-night study snacks to baby bottles and tiny, powder-fragranced nappies.

She flinched as her fingertips brushed crumbs hiding along the lower seam, before locating an envelope. She pulled it out, scanning the familiar handwriting. No return address. That always hit her hard, as though the deliberate omission somehow voided not only the letter's right to return but her own.

The letter would be nothing but a dry recount of local events, a journal of minor happenings in her hometown over the past month. The fact that the lifeless depiction came from someone who professed to have a love of the written word made it seem more of a betrayal, as though Mum was determined to make home less inviting. The charitable part of Lucie wanted to think this was a deliberate strategy so she wouldn't miss Chesterton so much.

The realistic part of her had other explanations.

Lucie flicked her thumb and forefinger against the envelope, punishing its existence. Collecting the mail from the doormat was one of Keeley's favourite jobs, but the almost four-year-old hadn't mentioned the arrival of the letter yesterday. Lucie had found it this morning among the sneakers and dirty socks in the entry hall when she came down to make her first cup of tea of the day. Saturday morning tea was a ritual. With a long commute to the office, weekdays were too rushed to relax and enjoy the steaming vapours from the herbs she had dried the previous year. She always brewed the tea as soon as she woke, leaving it to steep on the kitchen bench while she took a few precious moments to centre herself in her small garden.

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The roller door on the neighbour's garage, which shared a rendered-cement wall with her garden, rattled and laboriously ground open. Seconds later, Mrs A revved the life out of her old Volvo. The ghost departed in a cloud of blue smoke that drifted across the courtyard, and Lucie waved aside the burning oil, returning her attention to the envelope.

As always, it was postmarked from Settlers Bridge. Mum chose to bypass a half-dozen villages, most with their own postal agency, to drive more than forty kilometres to send her mail from a town so tiny that the post office doubled as a general store, tripled as a lottery outlet and quadrupled as a dry-cleaning agency. Lucie suspected only letters to her were dispatched from Settlers Bridge. No one there knew Mum: they wouldn't ask where Lucie was or what she was doing these days.

She had only been to Settlers Bridge a handful of times—for the district agricultural show held in a paddock on the outskirts—and could barely remember the place beyond the smell of fried donuts, battered hot dogs, fairy floss and overheating grease from the labouring fairground rides. She would have forgotten the riverside town entirely except that Jeremy had said he had lived there for a while. She remembered everything he had ever told her: of course, she'd had more than four years to relive each of their conversations, dissecting what was said . . . and what had been left unsaid.

As always, she pushed thoughts of him from her mind. It was enough to have lost Dad; she didn't need to dwell on Jeremy.

Noise blared from inside the townhouse, scaring a tiny grey fantail from the potted echinacea she was coaxing along so she could harvest it before next winter's colds and sniffles set in. Lucie groaned at the inevitability of her weekend. It was time for the battle over the Saturday morning cartoon volume and, as always, there would be only one acceptable solution according to Keeley: pancakes traded for volume moderation.

No matter how light and fluffy, pancakes left a bitter taste in Lucie's mouth—because they should be served with strawberries and vanilla-bean cream.

But she hadn't touched a strawberry in years.

The last vestige of morning tranquillity vanquished, Lucie heaved a sigh and slit the envelope with her thumbnail. She slowly stood up from the swinging chair, skimming the words that marched across the page with a decisive, spiky abruptness.

The paper trembled from her suddenly numb fingers. Drifted to the ground like a leaf, the grace at odds with the panicked hammering of her heart.

All oxygen abruptly sucked from the air, the blood thundered in her ears.

Her legs gave out.

Her lips moved wordlessly. *No.*

Frozen fingers inching back towards the letter, she crept up on the news, rather than confronting it.

Her mother's impersonal writing wavered before her eyes. Disjointed sentences with large areas blacked out, although

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Lucie couldn't tell whether that was in her head or on the page: . . . *heart failure . . . instantly fatal . . . funeral . . .*

No. No one sent this kind of news in a letter.

Mum was lying.

Had to be.

Because Lucie wasn't one of those girls who fled the farm, vowing never to return once she'd had a taste of city living. No, Lucie had always promised herself she would go back.

One day.

As soon as Dad forgave her.

2

Jack

‘Hey, Tay. Your uni friend not around anymore?’ Jack asked, leaning across Taylor to grab his helmet from the kitchen bench. His cousin had done a heck of a job whipping the hundred-and-fifty-year-old farmhouse into shape, seamlessly blending mod cons with the stone-walled cottage. Sleek steel appliances and polished-granite benches somehow fit perfectly with the original small-paned window above the sink and the aged floorboards. Instead of recipe books, the open shelves above the microwave were packed with Taylor’s medical tomes, and Luke’s *AgJournal* and *Ingrain* magazines teetered in a high pile on one end of the comfortably cluttered counter. Taylor would be the first to admit she didn’t need the kitchen space for baking.

Taylor glanced up from the cream and jam-stuffed cake she was hacking into wedges. ‘You keep your eyes to

yourself, Jack Schenscher. Her partner flew back from the mines yesterday, so she headed home. In any case, she's not technically a uni friend—I was med, she was law. Just a pal from back in the day.'

Jack shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant. 'P-p-potatoes, pohtartoes.' His shoulders tensed in habitual anticipation of the blow that would fail to correct his stutter. 'Anyway, I tuned out as soon as you said *partner*. Though you can't blame a guy for looking: you've no idea what it's like to spot a girl around here that I didn't know in high school.'

'More like one who you didn't *do* in high school, from what I hear,' Taylor smirked, licking the finger she'd swiped along the side of the knife blade.

'Hey, fair go,' he protested. 'I'm related to most of them.'

'Mm-hmm.' Taylor lifted one eyebrow. 'Thought I heard the sound of banjos in the distance.'

'Harsh,' Luke said, shaking an empty Cheezels box as he wandered into the room. He dropped the box onto the counter and rooted through the bag of groceries spilling across the table. 'But true enough. There's a distinct lack of fresh blood in this area. That's why I picked me a city gal,' he drawled, laying on an American twang. 'Don't got me no taste for string music.' He pulled open a bag of corn chips, offering them to Taylor, then Jack. 'Anyway, who are we gossiping about like we're at a Cranky Women's Association get-together?'

'Death wish, cuz,' Jack warned.

'Slip of the tongue. I meant Chicks With Attitude, obviously,' Luke grinned.

Taylor butted him with her hip, though the shove failed to move her husband an inch. ‘Nice save, except that was from a decade ago. We’re Chicks With Agency now. You guys like to rag on the CWA for being a bunch of gossipy cooks—and I’m not going to pretend we don’t have a good old yak—but there’s a lot more to it than that. You can thank the CWA for seatbelt laws, flashing school lights and free mobile breast-screening units. Maybe instead of teaching food tech, schools should be empowering students by showing them that it’s possible to bake the best scones *and* change the world.’

‘Take it easy there, hon. Let’s not completely abolish the cooking lessons,’ Luke said, then yelped as Taylor flicked him with a tea towel.

Jack chuckled. ‘I was chasing down intel on Tay’s friend,’ he said, hoping to spark a bit of bro-based sympathy in his cousin. Short of *Farmer Wants a Wife* coming to town to shoot a season, there was a fair chance half the local guys were going into the next decade still solo. ‘She’s the first new girl I’ve seen round here since Roni turned up.’ He tilted his head towards the lounge room, where laughter from a handful of their friends drowned out the dying moments of the footy on TV. As usual, Taylor had mother-henned them all together. Not because today’s game was anything special but because she kept a close eye on the outliers—the guys who, isolated by hard work and the rural lifestyle, tended to shut down tighter than a diesel storage tank. He knew Taylor’s initiative was partly because, as the local GP, she blamed herself for what had happened with Simon

Krueger a few years back. Not that anyone else did; they might not talk about the black dog much, but there weren't many locals who hadn't heard his growl.

With her trademark mix of nagging and professional insistence, every few weeks Taylor made them all get together for a couple of beers and a barbie. A yarn about stock, crops, the weather, the footy. Whatever. There were only so many conversations that could be had with your dog, and sometimes a guy just needed some semi-articulate company to not share his feelings with. Not that any of them ever got a chance to sit around dwelling: even in the down season there was equipment to fix, fencing to maintain, projects to start. And the paperwork. He hated the damn stuff. Numbers were not his thing.

'Speaking of Roni,' Taylor said. 'She made this sponge, so you'll be safe eating it.'

Jack shook his head. 'I'll take a raincheck. The pump at The Twenty is giving me grief, so I'd best go sort it out.'

'You've persuaded your partner on that new set-up?' Luke said.

'Nope. Can lead a horse to water, but that's about it.'

'What is it you want to do?' Taylor asked.

She had managed to smear cream across her cheek and Jack let his gaze wander the room, so he wouldn't laugh. 'I'm trying to talk Gus into putting the pump on solar.'

'You pump straight from the river?'

He waited for the fridge to stop beeping as Luke held the door open, checking out the contents. 'I wish. But The Twenty doesn't have a water licence.' With the coveted

licences hard to come by, for years he'd been jonesing for a piece of the three-kilometre river flat nestled between fossil-studded, orangey-yellow sandstone buttresses. But until the nine-hectare property came on the market, it had been nothing more than a dream. Actually, if the block had ever officially made it to market, the organic dairy next door would have snapped it up. Luckily, he'd had an inside edge—plus a priceless introduction to his business partner, Gus. 'There's plenty of groundwater, thanks to the irrigators, so it's a matter of working out the best way to access that. A windmill would do the trick.'

Luke grabbed a juice, closed the fridge and kissed his wife's cheek, managing to make the cream disappear. 'Mate,' he turned back to Jack, 'we're millennials. The progressive generation. You do realise that tilting at windmills is like stepping back a hundred years?'

'And you're going to argue that's such a bad thing?' Taylor hiked an eyebrow at Luke.

'Never dare argue with you, babe.' Luke wrapped his arms around her waist from behind, but shot Jack a wink over her head.

'Tilting at windmills,' Jack snorted. 'Nice one. Didn't realise you were that educated.'

'Same school as you, cuz.'

'Global warming isn't an imagined adversary, though.' Jack said. 'Tay's right: what our great-grandparents had going was a hell of a lot more sustainable than the way we're running the place into the ground.'

“‘Tay’s right’,” Luke mimicked with an eyeroll. ‘Man, I thought you’d have my back. What happened to the days of bros and beers? Time was, we were all playing footy together, checking out the girls. Now you’re a dreadlocked greenie, Matt’s a vego—’

‘And you’re an old married man,’ Jack said, running a hand through his hair. Although a bit on the long side, it wasn’t in dreadlocks. And it was easier to tie his hair back with a strip of flat leather he always kept in his pocket than rely on Samantha finding time away from the cafe to chop it for him. Besides, his sister had screwed up a couple of years back, leaving him with a bowl cut that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a nineties’ boy band. He’d taken it back to a number one before leaving her place, not sure whether to laugh along with her or be pissed he’d have to wear a beanie for months.

He scrubbed at his chin, fingers tangling in his beard. It was probably time he hit that with the clippers, though. ‘In any case, I don’t recall you doing too much checking out of the girls.’ He gestured towards Taylor. ‘You guys have been together since forever. Next thing we know you’ll be producing generation whatever-we’re-up-to. Alpha?’

Luke and Taylor exchanged a glance, and Jack winced. People round here were all over each other’s business—largely because they *were* family—and he should know well enough to stay out of it.

‘Yeah, together forever.’ Luke kissed Taylor’s cheek before releasing her waist. ‘You want a hand with that pump?’ He jerked a thumb towards the doorway, where two nosy

chickens cheeped and ruffled their feathers on the hearthstone, occasionally pecking at the screen.

‘Thanks, but she’ll be right. I need to duck home first and pick up the ute.’

‘So much for your carbon neutral footprint, mate.’

Jack clowned copping a punch. ‘The Holden’s a dinosaur, so I reckon that makes her exempt from emissions ratings.’

‘Time for an upgrade?’ Luke asked.

‘I wish. But not unless my returns are ten times the expected. She’ll do the job for now. I need to haul some rabbit wire out there, keep the damn yabbies out of the filter.’

‘Bring us back a feed, then. They’re sure to be clean, coming from your place.’

Jack brushed off his cousin’s compliment, as though the low chemical load he maintained on his land was incidental rather than a result of bloody hard work and reinvesting every cent he ever made. ‘They’d be floating if they weren’t clean, mate.’

‘They can’t cope with a toxin load?’ Taylor asked. ‘I guess they’re the farmer’s version of canaries in the mines.’

‘Don’t know about that,’ Jack said. ‘Never heard a yabby sing.’

Taylor chuckled but lifted her chin towards the helmet he dangled from one hand. ‘You make sure you put that on. I saw you out in the paddock the other day without it.’

‘Yes, doc,’ he responded contritely, though he grinned at Luke. Like they ever wore their helmets on the farms. In any case, he’d limited himself to a couple of beers, knowing that not only did he have to hit the road early but there

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was always the risk that Taylor would make him take a breathalyser before he left. She'd done a few stints in emergency in the city and was pretty hot on safety. But it'd be fine; he had no intention of being roadkill.